



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

WEDNESDAY — 22 DEC 2021



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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	12/22 Sick and tired of being sick and tired
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/22/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#americans-are-tired-and-omicron-is-just-beginning
GIST	<p>With days to go before Christmas, Americans are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Of reworking plans to adapt to the latest virus risks. Of searching for at-home tests and not finding them. Of wondering whether after two years of avoiding Covid-19, or surviving it, or getting vaccinated and maybe even boosted, Omicron is the variant they inevitably catch.</p> <p>A sense of dread about Omicron's rapid spread — the fastest of any variant yet — has swept through the Northeast and Upper Midwest, which were already swamped with Delta variant cases and hospitalizations. And unease has burgeoned even in states and territories like Florida, Hawaii and Puerto Rico that had moved past a terrible summer of Delta and, until recently, experienced a relative virus lull.</p> <p>“I’m mad,” said Mabel De Beunza, a publicist in her early 40s who spent 90 minutes at a drive-through testing line in downtown Miami on Monday after experiencing cold symptoms. No matter what her test result, she had decided against seeing her mother, who is immunocompromised, on Christmas.</p> <p>Conversations with more than two dozen people across the country revealed that, more than panicked, Americans are exhausted by the emotional pandemic roller coaster and confused by mixed messages from experts and leaders about appropriate precautions.</p> <p>“We’ve done so much, and still have this,” said Ms. De Beunza, whose family is vaccinated and boosted. “It’s been such a rough year.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 DOH: as omicron surges, flu circulating
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/omicron-flu-washington-covid-cases/281-269d292b-c027-48db-9bde-68edcf30edf0
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) revealed Tuesday that as the new omicron variant of COVID-19 is surging in the state, another older threat is also circulating.</p> <p>After a very quiet 2020-2021 season, flu cases are beginning to rise in the state, particularly influenza A cases.</p> <p>According to the weekly surveillance report, flu activity remains low, but the number of positive flu cases in the state is already higher through the first few weeks of flu season this year than all of last winter.</p> <p>According to the DOH influenza summary from last season, there were nine positive flu specimens sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from Washington. This year, there have already been more than 30 through the first four weeks of reporting.</p> <p>The unusually low flu activity last season was accounted for by the safety measures in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic including the closure of businesses and public masking requirements.</p> <p>During Tuesday’s DOH briefing, state epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist expressed his concern over the new flu cases, which are coming as COVID-19 cases are expected to rise due to the apparently highly transmissible omicron variant.</p> <p>As of Tuesday morning, 400 omicron cases have been identified in Washington, and the DOH has shifted its attention to track where the variant is and how it is performing compared to the delta variant in various regions around the state.</p>

	<p>A recent uptick in COVID-19 cases in 14- to 19-year-olds has been linked to four high school wrestling tournaments in western Washington at the beginning of December. As of Tuesday morning, more than 350 COVID-19 cases have been linked to these outbreaks.</p> <p>Now, officials are saying that it more important that individuals who have not gotten their COVID-19 and flu vaccines already do so immediately. As for omicron, officials say the most effective way to battle the new variant is to get a booster shot as soon as possible.</p> <p>According to Secretary of Health Dr. Umair Shah, the most important thing for everyone looking to protect themselves against omicron is to protect against severe illness.</p> <p>“So, it may be a confusing message to people, but it’s pretty clear. Get boosted. Get boosted. Don’t wait, get boosted,” Shah said.</p> <p>As of Dec. 18, roughly 1.7 million booster doses have been given out across the state. As of Saturday, data shows that about 62% of the state’s total population is fully vaccinated.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 DOH: increase in cases linked to kids
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/doh-evidence-shows-increase-in-covid-cases-linked-to-kids-in-wa
GIST	<p>TRI-CITIES, Wash. — Ahead of the holidays, state health leaders say their message is simple, get vaccinated and get boosted.</p> <p>The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) said they're seeing more COVID-19 cases linked to kids.</p> <p>Chief Science Officer Dr. Tao Kwan-Gett said it's a good idea to get eligible kids vaccinated, especially if they're gathering with older family members for the holidays.</p> <p>"Vaccinating children can be an important way to protect their grandparents, their aunts, their uncles, their parents, siblings and other members of the family who are at higher risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19 either from age or chronic conditions," Dr. Kwan-Gett said.</p> <p>The DOH said they're still investigating a COVID outbreak they believe stemmed from wrestling events across the state.</p> <p>Officials said they’ve linked 350 cases of COVID-19 to the events, mainly involving teens between the ages of 14 to 19.</p> <p>Now with the Omicron variant spreading across the state and the country, they said its more important than ever to get vaccinated.</p> <p>As of Tuesday, Dec 21, state health leaders report 400 cases of the Omicron variant identified in Washington state.</p> <p>For more information about COVID-19 in Washington state, click here.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Sweden tightens Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-tightens-covid-restrictions-cases-mount-2021-12-21/
GIST	<p>STOCKHOLM, Dec 21 (Reuters) - Sweden will urge all employees to work from home if possible and impose tighter rules for social distancing, the government said on Tuesday, as it ratchets up restrictions to fight a surge in new infections and the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus.</p>

The number of new virus cases in Sweden, which sparked international attention last year for its rejection of hard lockdowns, have shot up in recent weeks after a calm autumn when most restrictions were phased out.

Hospitalizations and intensive care cases are still among the lowest per capita in Europe, but have also begun rising.

"The pace of new infections is rising fast and we are seeing more pressure on the healthcare system," Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson told a news conference. "The spread of the new virus variant - Omicron - is worrying."

Sweden saw 12,681 new cases and 11 deaths in the period from Saturday to Monday, the Public Health Agency said. It expects the pace of new infections to increase in the coming weeks, mainly due to the more easily-transmitted Omicron variant.

The peak, which is expected in mid-January, could be as high as 15,000 new cases per day if the Agency's worst-case scenario proves correct. That would be the highest daily number since the start of the pandemic in early 2020.

The latest restrictions - the second stage of the government's plans - includes a limit of 50 people at private gatherings and the need for a vaccination pass for public events where there are more than 500 people.

Bars and restaurants will only be able to serve seated guests while the public will also have to be seated at larger events - like football matches. Shops will have to limit the number of customers to prevent crowding.

Earlier this month, the government reintroduced some limited measures, such as the use of masks on public transport. It has warned that further measures may be needed if the situation deteriorates.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Portugal imposes post-Christmas curbs
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/portugal-imposes-post-christmas-covid-19-curbs-omicron-cases-surge-2021-12-21/
GIST	<p>LISBON, Dec 21 (Reuters) - Portugal on Tuesday ordered nightclubs and bars to close and told people to work from home for at least two weeks starting on Saturday to control the spread of COVID-19 over the holiday period.</p> <p>"This still isn't the normal Christmas we are used to," Prime Minister Antonio Costa told a news conference. "If we do not adopt these measures now, the consequences on everyone's lives will be much worse after Christmas and the New Year."</p> <p>Costa also announced capacity restrictions at stores and said a negative coronavirus test would now be required to stay at hotels or go to events.</p> <p>Authorities will also limit outdoor gatherings to 10 people per group on New Year's Eve, when a negative test will be needed to enter restaurants, casinos or attend parties in public spaces, Costa said.</p> <p>Most of the measures announced by Costa were initially meant to come into force in early January but the current pandemic situation forced the government to implement them ahead of time, he added.</p> <p>Portugal, which has one of the world's highest rates of vaccination against COVID-19 with around 87% of its 10 million population fully inoculated, is facing a surge in infections along with the rest of Europe, in part due to the fast-spreading Omicron variant.</p>

	<p>Close to 50% of new coronavirus cases in Portugal are from the Omicron variant, the national health institute said in a report on Tuesday.</p> <p>The country reported 5,754 new COVID-19 cases on Tuesday, returning to levels last seen in February, when it faced its toughest battle against the illness, but deaths and hospitalisations remain low compared to that period.</p> <p>Health Minister Marta Temido said last week Omicron infections were doubling every two days and could account for 80% of all new cases by the end of the month.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Singapore freezes travel ticket sales
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/singapore-freeze-new-ticket-sales-quarantine-free-travel-2021-12-22/
GIST	<p>SINGAPORE, Dec 22 (Reuters) - Singapore will freeze the sale of tickets for arriving flights and buses under its quarantine-free travel programme for four weeks from Thursday, the government said, citing the risk from the fast-spreading Omicron COVID-19 variant.</p> <p>Under the vaccinated travel lane (VTL) programme, Singapore allows quarantine-free entry for fully vaccinated travellers arriving from certain countries on designated flights or buses. The travellers have to undergo regular testing.</p> <p>About two dozen countries are listed in the programme including Australia, India, Malaysia, Britain and the United States.</p> <p>But no new tickets would be issued for people hoping to arrive from any of those countries from Thursday to Jan. 20, the government said on Wednesday.</p> <p>"Our border measures will help to buy us time to study and understand the Omicron variant, and to strengthen our defences, including enhancing our healthcare capacity, and getting more people vaccinated and boosted," the health ministry said in a statement.</p> <p>The government said it would also reduce the VTL quotas and ticket sales for travel after Jan. 20. For flights, the total number of VTL tickets would be capped at 50% of the previously allocated quota.</p> <p>Travellers already holding tickets on VTL flights or buses and who meet all other requirements can still travel under the programme.</p> <p>The government also urged people arriving in Singapore to minimise their social interactions, avoid large gatherings and eating out for seven days even if their tests, which they have to take every day for the week, are negative.</p> <p>Singapore has confirmed 65 imported Omicron cases, along with a handful of local cases. But the government said it has been able to limit onward community transmission.</p> <p>The health ministry said on Monday it had found a suspected Omicron cluster in a gym.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 B.C. orders closures due to omicron
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-europe-barcelona-spain-121fd89e11265cd45537eec86c96db00
GIST	<p>VICTORIA, British Columbia — The Canadian Pacific Coast province of British Columbia is closing bars, nightclubs and gyms because of the omicron coronavirus variant.</p>

	<p>Starting at 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, bars, nightclubs, gyms, fitness centers and dance studios will have to close, and all seated events will be reduced to 50% capacity. Indoor gatherings, including weddings, are being cancelled.</p> <p>Provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry said Tuesday the risk posed by omicron is “fundamentally different” than other variants and it more easily infects those who are vaccinated or have had COVID-19.</p> <p>She said the province is seeing “explosive outbreaks,” with a large number of people being exposed at the same time. There’s also been a spike in cases among those aged 18 to 35.</p> <p>The French-speaking province of Quebec announced Monday that it is closing bars, cinemas, gyms and spas because of a record number of coronavirus cases.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 India, China border: military buildup
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/on-volatile-border-between-india-and-china-a-high-altitude-military-buildup-is-underway/ar-AAS33Ju
GIST	<p>ZOJI LA PASS, India — The construction crew peered into two inky shafts bored into a rocky cliff face, bracing against the bitter cold and the impending blast.</p> <p>Harpal Singh gave the go-ahead. The mountain was rocked by a thunderous explosion and, moments later, patriotic cheers. India was one step closer to completing a top strategic priority: a series of new tunnels and roads leading to the increasingly militarized border with China.</p> <p>The tunnel will “safeguard the territorial integrity of our motherland,” said Singh, an engineer overseeing about 1,700 men racing to finish one stretch of the \$600 million upgrade. Down the twisting one-lane road from their work site were parked construction machinery, heavy trucks hauling winter supplies for the army and armored vehicles under camouflage-patterned tarp, all preparing to make an arduous drive to the border that will become substantially shorter once the construction is finished.</p> <p>“We understand the importance of this project,” Singh said. “It’s the vital supply line to the border with China.”</p> <p>High in this corner of the Himalayas, an expanse of snowy peaks and glacier-fed rivers claimed by both China and India, a tense standoff between the two armies is spurring a flurry of infrastructure and military buildup that’s transforming one of the world’s most remote and inhospitable regions.</p> <p>On the Chinese side of the unmarked border, new helicopter pads, runways and railroads have been laid on the Tibetan plateau, according to satellite images and state media reports. On the Indian side, officials are rushing construction on the Zoji La tunnels, upgrading several strategic roads and unveiling new cell towers and landing strips. Both countries have deployed more military force to the border, with India diverting nearly 50,000 mountainous warfare troops there, according to current and former Indian military officials. In recent months, both militaries have publicized combat readiness drills to practice airlifting thousands of soldiers to the front lines at a moment’s notice.</p> <p>Following 13 rounds of inconclusive negotiations between military commanders since June 2020, the standoff is now entering a second winter, an unprecedented development that is stretching logistics and budgets — especially for India. But the result, observers say, is a normalization of a hardened border and a fragile stalemate between two Asian powers that could last for years.</p> <p>Retired Lt. Gen. Deependra Hooda, who served until 2016 as head of the Indian Army’s Northern Command, said India last year assigned, for the first time, an offensively oriented mountain warfare division to the China border.</p>

“The thinking was always we could handle China politically, diplomatically, but that feeling changed after 2020,” said Hooda, who directs the Council for Strategic and Defense Research think tank in New Delhi.

The deployed troops require “huge infrastructure to support them, huge reserves to replace them,” he added. “But even if there is a diplomatic process, the fact is that suspicions are going to remain. There’s no way of returning to the status quo.”

The question of where India ends and China begins has been the subject of negotiations by various parties — including the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty, and an independent India under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Communist China led by Mao Zedong. The roughly 2,100-mile border does not cleave through significant natural resources or population centers, but the dispute over where exactly it lies has led to a bloody war and several skirmishes.

The current impasse began in May 2020, when Chinese patrols objected to Indian construction on a strategically placed road in Ladakh, inside territory that China claimed. The faceoff culminated in a brawl that killed scores of soldiers that June.

Infrastructure construction also sparked earlier flare-ups. In 1957, China built a road linking the two vast and restive regions of its western periphery — Tibet and Xinjiang — that crisscrossed an expanse of salt flats that India claims to be part of Ladakh. Tensions over the road simmered and contributed to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, in which China attacked India and both sides saw thousands of men die in freezing conditions.

In 2017, Chinese workers sought to build roads near India’s Sikkim state before they were stopped by Indian troops, creating [a diplomatic crisis](#).

India needs to firm up its border by building infrastructure not only for its military, but for its civilians, said Sonam Tsering, a former village councilor from Chushul, which overlooks a lake where new structures housing Chinese troops have materialized over the past year.

Nearby Demchok village, which didn’t have electricity a decade ago, only got its first cell tower in November, Tsering said. Basic roads are still lacking in the region, and many residents are simply moving away due to poor living conditions, which erodes India’s territorial claims, he added. Last month, a village leader wrote a letter to India’s defense minister pleading for reliable electricity, basic hospitals and roads, and 4G cell towers for nine villages without service.

“The Chinese villages across the Indus River have had multiple cell towers for the last 15 years, with cable TV, electricity lines, big concrete houses, wide, paved roads,” Tsering said. “China gives citizens incentives to live in these forward villages because they know civilians living there are the first line of defense.”

[A Pentagon report in November](#) said China has recently built a small settlement in disputed territory on the eastern section of the India-China border. Military infrastructure has also boomed: Satellite imagery suggests that between 2019 and 2020, China had finished expansion projects on about 20 helipads or airstrips bordering India, said Sim Tack, a former military analyst for Stratfor, a private intelligence firm.

Both Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping have equated infrastructure with national security. After Indian and Chinese troops clashed last summer, Modi vowed to triple spending on border infrastructure and assured troops in Ladakh that India’s enemies had tasted its “fire and fury.” This year, Xi traveled to Tibet for the first time to inspect a new railway leading to the Indian border, then told People’s Liberation Army officers at a command center to “comprehensively strengthen training and preparation work.”

Wang Xiaojian, spokesman for the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, said China was committed to peace at the border and considered the situation “stable and controllable,” while adding that China would firmly safeguard its territorial sovereignty. Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesman Arindam Bagchi said

the two countries' foreign ministers met most recently in September 2021 in Tajikistan and agreed to continue talks between diplomats and military commanders to resolve the remaining issues.

Christopher Clary, an expert on India-China military relations at the University of Albany, said the border buildup has been "asymmetrically" more taxing for India than China, which has a defense budget that is 3.5 times larger and a GDP six times greater. Chinese leaders have historically been wary of antagonizing India, Clary said, but they could afford to prolong the standoff as a way to punish India for its growing closeness with the United States and its allies.

"There must be concern as India increasingly takes part in the Quad, and other alignments perceived as encircling China, and Beijing may want to use demonstrative force to show there are red lines," Clary said, noting that Mao attacked India in 1962 after sensing Nehru's closeness with his rival, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

In the decades following India's defeat in 1962, Nehru intentionally avoided building infrastructure in Ladakh, fearing that roads might help the Chinese army descend the Himalayas and march on the Indian capital, said Srikanth Kondapalli, a professor of Chinese studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

But today, the thinking in New Delhi has flipped. On the road to Ladakh on a recent afternoon before the start of the snow season, dozens of heavy trucks painted with pictures of Sufi saints idled at a weigh station, their drivers milling about.

"I have been traveling on this road for the last 35 years but never seen it as busy as it is now," said Nazir Ahmad Wani, 65, a Kashmiri driver who was bringing machinery and winter supplies to the border.

Wani recalled volunteering to shuttle goods during the 1999 Kargil War, when Pakistan shelled the road. Now, about 200 out of 500 trucks every day are again carrying military supplies, Wani estimated. There's no shooting, he said, but a familiar sense of tension.

"It's scary to see lots of men and weapons being ferried every day to Ladakh," Wani said. "It's as if something big is about to happen."

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HEADLINE	12/21 Amazon leans on federal law enforcement
SOURCE	https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/21/amazon-federal-law-enforcement-525794
GIST	<p>Amazon has found a powerful ally to help it protect its sprawling operations from fraud and abuse: the U.S. government.</p> <p>The company has increasingly tipped off the Justice Department and FBI to investigate Amazon's own employees and the sellers using its platform, according to a POLITICO analysis and a dozen interviews with Amazon employees, former federal prosecutors and financial crime experts. In addition, it has hired dozens of former DOJ and FBI employees, some of whom are filling out its internal teams aimed at policing its platform.</p> <p>In the process, Amazon has built a closer relationship than many large companies have with federal law enforcement, a deep cooperation with one branch of the federal government that could help the company's reputation in Washington as Amazon faces intensifying scrutiny from Congress and federal agencies over its market dominance and fraud on its platform.</p> <p>The federal government has also indicted 20 people for crimes related to Amazon in the past year and a half, according to an analysis of public records — a number that exceeds indictments related to other comparably large companies like Walmart and FedEx. Over the same time period, the DOJ has announced three indictments against people committing criminal activity involving Walmart and two involving crimes related to FedEx.</p>

Meanwhile, 15 more people are under federal investigation for Amazon-related crimes, according to the DOJ's disclosures. Six of the people indicted have pleaded guilty; 14 are awaiting trial. In many of those cases, Amazon either tipped off the government or cooperated closely with the investigations.

J. Kelly Strader, an author and academic focused on how companies deal with the government when they handle white-collar crime, said Amazon's approach suggests a strategy that goes beyond simply reining in criminal activity.

"This looks like a huge and powerful company attempting to generate goodwill and appear to be cooperative with the government," Strader said.

Ankush Khardori, a former federal prosecutor who specialized in financial fraud and white-collar crime, called Amazon's tighter relationship a "smart thing for a company like Amazon to do in the current political climate," in which the major tech companies are coming under greater regulatory scrutiny.

"It's interesting because it's different from a lot of the other tech companies," Khardori said. He added that the other companies have a more "passive" relationship with law enforcement — mostly focused on access to their data.

While federal officials have discretion over which criminal cases they choose to pursue, Amazon has invested significant resources into pushing prosecutors and investigators to take on cases that it prefers. And the company appears to be getting results.

Many of the law enforcement actions show Amazon attempting to address the [billions of counterfeit goods](#), fraudulent listings and scams on its ever-growing e-commerce platform amid criticism from federal regulators and U.S. lawmakers that it hasn't done enough to curtail criminal activity. (Amazon said in 2019 that it had [more than 8,000 employees fighting fraud](#) on the platform, a number that stands at 10,000 now.) In doing so, Amazon has also built up an apparatus to make sure its issues get quick attention from law enforcement agencies with limited resources, in what some critics argue amounts to outsourcing what should be internal policing of its platform to federal law enforcement.

"This is not the best way for Amazon to deal with these issues," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), the top Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Consumer Protection Subcommittee. "Amazon's platform has become a crime scene riddled with dangerous, defective and counterfeit products. While Amazon cooperates with the government in some cases, in others, we have seen it relist its own supply of counterfeit products multiple times even after agreeing to stop."

The company has [established an internal unit](#) filled with former federal prosecutors and investigators to root out counterfeits on Amazon's platform. That unit, which Amazon created amid legislative threats from lawmakers, has been busily handing off leads to the government.

One former government official who now works at Amazon said the company has formed "analytical groups" filled with former government officials that are tasked with conducting investigations both into fraud and theft on Amazon's platform.

Although Amazon is [known to have sway with lawmakers and regulators](#), the company's successful push for criminal proceedings is meaningful, considering law is traditionally seen as an arena insulated from corporate influence.

For its part, Amazon argues that its referrals to law enforcement show that it is taking forceful action against criminal activity.

"We take our responsibility seriously to protect our customers and selling partners from fraud and abuse," said Amazon spokesperson Jodi Seth. "We are proud of the industry-leading investments we've made in technology and human expertise to prevent criminal activity and deter bad actors."

“Like any responsible company, when we become aware of activity that is potentially illegal, we refer it to law enforcement to further investigate,” Seth said. She added that Amazon encourages “more companies to help stop fraud at the source by holding bad actors accountable — it’s the right thing to do and it would help protect more people.”

DOJ, meanwhile, said it does not favor any company in deciding what to investigate.

“The Justice Department’s long-standing practice is to encourage tips of criminal wrongdoing from all sources, to not favor one company over another, to follow the facts and evidence where they lead, and to bring criminal prosecutions only in accordance with the Principles of Federal Prosecution,” DOJ spokesperson Dena Iverson said in a statement.

Comparable employers like Walmart and FedEx also struggle with criminal activity across their large operations, though they often face different issues. Former FedEx employees, for instance, have been connected to a [trucking bribery scheme](#) and charged with [mail theft](#). And Walmart has been the victim of [high-profile robberies](#). The DOJ has sued [Walmart](#) for unlawful opioid distribution and [FedEx](#) for drug-related criminal charges. The companies have disputed the charges, and the charges against FedEx were dropped during the trial. The DOJ has not sued Amazon, which has a smaller footprint in pharmaceuticals distribution.

Amazon builds ties to the feds

Amazon has spent years building a closer relationship with federal law enforcement, by partnering with the DOJ and FBI and hiring many former officials. It’s similar to the approach taken by large financial institutions like banks, which often proactively refer cases of money laundering or fraud to the government in order to avoid liability. “Sometimes when companies or financial institutions uncover fraud, they want to get ahead of it,” said one former federal prosecutor, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss cases they participated in. “They want to go to the government and say, ‘This is a one-off.’”

Renato Mariotti, a former federal prosecutor in the securities and commodities fraud section of the U.S. Attorney’s office in Chicago, said law enforcement often begins to rely on the groundwork laid by big companies like Amazon, who can afford to invest resources into their partnerships with the government. “If a company is able to put together a case well, they can serve it up on a silver platter with a bow on it to law enforcement to make it very easy for federal law enforcement to take,” Mariotti said.

Amazon has hired people with deep ties to federal law enforcement to bolster its work. The company currently employs at least 21 former federal prosecutors and at least 49 former FBI employees, according to a review of LinkedIn pages of current Amazon employees. Those hires include [Jeffrey Goldberg](#), former deputy chief of the fraud section of the DOJ’s criminal division; Andrew Devore, former assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York; and [Sean Farrell](#), former chief of the FBI’s cyber unit. Brian Huseman, the vice president of public policy at Amazon and a powerful figure in its Washington office, is a former DOJ trial attorney.

“Amazon’s hiring of former federal law enforcement agents seems like a strategy to avoid liability without seriously addressing the fundamental problems with its marketplace,” Schakowsky said. Amazon did not respond to a question about its hiring of former DOJ and FBI officials.

Aitan Goelman, former assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York, said former government officials “do get a head start in terms of credibility” in the eyes of current federal prosecutors. “[Prosecutors] are less likely to believe someone’s coming in and misleading [them] if they’re a former FBI agent,” Goelman said.

Joining forces on big investigations

Amazon has teamed up with the federal government on a slew of cases in recent years.

Amazon extensively supported and publicized the DOJ’s prosecution of six individuals, including two former Amazon employees, who were indicted in the Western District of Washington on charges of

bribing co-workers to gain advantages for third-party sellers on the company's platform. That trial is expected to begin in January.

Amazon has also [invested significant resources](#) into taking on Carl Nelson, a former Amazon Web Services real estate manager whom the company has accused of participating in a complex pay-for-play scheme to steer AWS into entering into certain data center leases. During the FBI's investigation, which has lasted more than 22 months, the bureau has seized more than \$890,000 from Nelson and his wife, Amy, forcing the couple to sell their house and cars, liquidate their retirement funds and move in with family in Ohio, according to court filings. Nelson denies all of the allegations, and he has not been charged with any wrongdoing. Nelson sued Amazon in Washington for breach of contract, and while some of his claims are still pending, the court found that Amazon willfully breached its contract with him and awarded him damages. Amazon is pursuing civil racketeering and antitrust claims against Nelson in Virginia, among other allegations.

"I exist in this world where a company can simply accuse someone of a crime ... and as a result a government can take away every dollar a parent has," Amy Nelson [posted](#) on her [Instagram](#) earlier this year. "No one should have to endure this."

Although Nelson's case is [uniquely complicated](#), he is only one of several dozen former employees who have faced the combined resources of the U.S. government and Amazon. Amazon [reported one of them, former employee Vu Anh Nguyen, to U.S. authorities in July 2020](#), accusing him of using Amazon's internal tools to produce fraudulent refunds to himself and his associates. Nguyen pled guilty to one count of wire fraud and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Amazon has also teamed up with government investigators to go after sellers who have abused its giant platform.

The company assisted with an investigation into Joseph Sides, a Florida man [accused](#) of creating more than 500 Amazon accounts using false information to place more than 1,200 orders, which he returned and refunded. Sides ultimately pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years probation.

The e-commerce company has [touted its cooperation](#) with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York and the Department of Homeland Security during an investigation into four men accused of wire fraud and money laundering. The men were arrested and charged with engaging in a scheme to systematically defraud Amazon's vendor system, forcing Amazon to pay for goods that the company had not ordered, according to the company statement. Amazon did not offer more details on the company's views on the case.

Ilana Haramati, a lawyer representing one of the defendants in that case, Zishe Abraham, called the government's charges "trumped up civil disputes disguised as purported crimes."

"Taxpayer dollars and government resources should not be used to help Amazon settle a business score," Haramati said in an email.

The Trump administration [launched a campaign](#) led by DHS to force Amazon and other e-commerce platforms to crack down on counterfeits and illicit activity on its platform. One former senior DOJ official told POLITICO that the DOJ and FBI have also been pressing Amazon for years to better police criminal activity. The former official added that the DOJ needs to be "mindful and careful that they're not being used by the company that brings them the complaint and the information — that they're doing so for legitimate law enforcement reasons and not to gain competitive advantage and some sort of business advantage."

Public naming and shaming

Amazon differentiates itself from other large corporations by [publicly touting legal actions](#) it has taken against its employees and users amid accusations from lawmakers and regulators that it has not done enough to police its platform and has allowed employees access to data from third-party sellers.

When a man in Rhode Island pleaded guilty to wire fraud charges for returning products that were of lesser quality to Amazon for refunds, [the company issued a news release](#) expressing gratitude to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Rhode Island. The court sentenced Michael Chaves to 30 months in federal prison for defrauding Amazon of more than \$50,000.

In [a press release about the Western District of Washington case](#) last year, the company wrote, "There is no place for fraud at Amazon and we will continue to pursue all measures to protect our store and hold bad actors accountable."

Goelman, the former assistant U.S. attorney, said companies are often willing to put up with the bad publicity of criminal proceedings to deter current workers from attempting to take advantage of their positions. "Companies don't want the negative publicity of articles written about fraud on their platform, but they also want to make themselves a harder target," Goelman said.

Still, some other big retailers shy away from that approach. A Walmart executive said while the company does sometimes pursue criminal proceedings against employees, it has chosen to keep such legal action out of the press. "I think there are ways to send a signal to our own employee base that these things won't be tolerated without having to do a press release," the executive said, requesting anonymity in order to speak candidly about internal company dynamics.

Deflecting legislative scrutiny

Amazon began partnering more closely than ever with federal law enforcement as it [came under fire](#) in recent years for the masses of counterfeit products on its platform — and particularly after Congress began considering legislation that would [force the company to take more responsibility](#) for the counterfeits on its site.

One congressional aide involved in negotiations around the INFORM Consumers Act, which would require Amazon and other e-commerce platforms to implement more anti-counterfeit measures, said Amazon set up a unit focused on counterfeit issues only after the legislation was introduced.

"The sequencing of it could make it appear" that Amazon set up its Counterfeit Crimes Unit, which was established specifically to aid law enforcement investigations, in response to the legislative threat, the aide said, requesting anonymity to speak about private discussions with Amazon. Amazon did not respond to a question about whether the unit was established in response to legislative pressure.

The aide said lawmakers backing the legislation believe law enforcement can help reduce the number of counterfeits but "one-off, after-the-fact enforcement actions" are not enough to solve the issue. "There's too much volume of illicit sales on these sites for that to be an adequate deterrent," the aide added.

For now, legislation that would force Amazon to take more measures to police crime on its platform is moving slowly through Congress. And in the meantime, Amazon is only continuing to strengthen its ties to federal law enforcement — including by recently hiring Matthew Alcock, a senior FBI official who was in charge of counterterrorism for the bureau's D.C. field office during the Jan. 6 insurrection, as senior manager for physical security at AWS, according to a person familiar with the matter who requested anonymity to discuss personnel. Alcock didn't respond to a request for comment.

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HEADLINE	12/22 Japan Covid cases plummet: why?
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/while-omicron-explodes-around-the-world-covid-cases-in-japan-keep-plummeting-and-no-one-knows-exactly-why/ar-AAS34PH
GIST	TOKYO — As the omicron variant surges around the world, Japan's overall coronavirus cases and deaths have been plummeting. And no one seems to know exactly why.

Call it the hunt for a potential “X factor,” such as genetics, that may explain the trend and inform how Japan could deal with the next wave. While the new highly transmissible omicron variant has appeared in the country and experts suspect there is already some community spread, the overall transmission rate of the virus and coronavirus-related deaths in Japan have remained low.

“Honestly, we do not know the exact reason behind the sudden drop in covid deaths in Japan,” said Taro Yamamoto, professor of global health at Nagasaki University’s Institute of Tropical Medicine.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Japan has had much lower rates of infection and death than in many Western countries, though there was a severe spike over the summer that overwhelmed hospitals.

Milder outbreaks — compared with the ravages of the virus in Europe and the Americas — were found in many Asian countries and were attributed often to a public accustomed to health measures from previous experiences with respiratory illnesses like the SARS and MERS epidemics. [Researchers had also looked into genetics](#), diet and other factors that may have spared East Asian countries like Japan and South Korea from the high death tolls elsewhere.

In Japan, researchers have also examined factors like weather, cyclical patterns in the spread of the virus, and potential past exposure to mild coronavirus variants that may have led to the low case and death counts. Experts have identified potential genetic characteristics among the Japanese that may have led to a stronger immune system response to the coronavirus, but said there needs to be more research to draw definitive conclusions.

Japan has now vaccinated most of its population and has widespread masking, which may explain the current low numbers. But so does neighboring South Korea, where authorities are rescinding reopening plans because of a spike in infections and record numbers of serious and critical cases. And Japan has barely begun rolling out its booster shots, lagging behind other countries in the region, including South Korea.

“Obviously vaccination, masking and social distancing are surely factors, but those alone cannot explain it, especially when comparing the situation to South Korea,” Yamamoto said. “It is unclear yet whether there is a factor X that exists specific to Japanese or East Asian people, but in determining this we hope it can help us to understand and control the virus.”

In the past month, the official daily case count in Japan has ranged from about 60 to under 200 in a country of 127 million. There have been fewer than five coronavirus-related deaths recorded most days since early November.

Those numbers come with a caveat, and probably are an undercount of the pandemic’s true toll because of the lack of widespread testing, systemic contact tracing or vaccine passports, and delays in reporting of deaths from municipalities.

The lack of testing and the prevalence of asymptomatic cases means the government probably recorded one-fourth to one-tenth of the true number of cases until recently, when more testing options became available, according to Michinori Kohara, a researcher at the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Medical Science who led a study published last month on underreported and asymptomatic positive cases.

But even taking into account the underreporting, the number of cases and fatalities are a small fraction of the United States and many European countries.

Because of those limitations in detecting the true number of cases in the country, experts are paying attention to pressures on hospitals to gauge how the health-care system is faring, and whether there is a significant number of unreported coronavirus cases.

So far, they say, the situation has vastly improved since the spike in the summer, when hospitals were so overwhelmed that the government asked patients to treat themselves at home because there weren't enough beds to accommodate them. Seriously ill infections are now under control, experts say.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Friday that the government aims to provide free and accessible testing starting at the end of this month. He has also called for a study of the government's failures in responding to the spike this summer, including the cases where people died at home because the hospitals were full.

"There are some deaths and cases that may have been undercounted, but these numbers are not substantial enough to change the overall death rate or percentage," Yamamoto said.

Japan has kept tight control on its frontiers, especially as the omicron variant emerged, though there is some doubt about the effectiveness of border control measures in preventing the spread of the virus. On Thursday, Japan recorded its first case of the omicron variant in someone who had not traveled. Japanese officials are watching the omicron variant closely, and there have been at least 159 confirmed cases of it. But the overall case count remains low: In the past week, the seven-day average of daily new cases in Tokyo was 25.

Taisuke Nakata, associate professor of economics and public policy at the University of Tokyo Faculty of Economics, led a team that tested six hypotheses to explain why the cases have plunged since the summer spike: 120-day cycle of outbreaks, people avoiding places with high infection risks, vaccinations, weather, herd immunity, or that Japan is seeing a low reproduction rate of the coronavirus.

They found that the final factor, which represents how many people are infected by one positive case, was most probably the only one at play. But they still could not explain why the reproduction rate was low, or how it stayed low even as the government lifted the "state of emergency" status in October and more people were out in society.

The low case counts in Japan are particularly confounding given the situation in South Korea, which had often experienced similar periods of ebbs and flows.

"Many of us [in South Korea] are perplexed by how COVID-19 cases and deaths are approaching zero in the neighboring country," wrote Lee Duk-hee, professor of preventive medicine at Kyungpook National University in Daegu, in a blog post last month.

South Korea announced last week it would reimpose social distancing controls as the record spike of the coronavirus stymies the country's reopening plans. The announcement came about 45 days since the government began its "living with covid-19" reopening plan.

Last week, South Korea's daily caseloads surpassed 7,000 for the fifth time this month, with rising numbers of patients with serious or critical conditions. The health authorities have introduced at-home treatment for virus patients with light symptoms amid a shortage in hospital beds.

Some Japanese researchers have pointed to studies that found genetic or health conditions in Japan, including low prevalence of obesity.

A study published this month by Japan's Riken research institute, the country's largest scientific research body, found that a genetic feature found in the white blood cells of up to 60 percent of Japanese people mounts an immune response to the coronavirus. The immune response was seen in 80 percent of the people with this genetic feature, and researchers found that it may explain one theory about Japan's experience with the coronavirus.

This genetic feature, called HLA-A24, is common in East Asian countries and has been found in many countries that have had less severe experiences with the coronavirus, including Japan and Korea. But now,

	<p>with the diverging experiences of Japan and Korea in the past two months, researchers said they hope to see more work done to find out more about what’s going on.</p> <p>“Covid cases and deaths were low in Korea until now, but with the surge now and comparison with Japan, it would be interesting to examine what the immunity situation looks like now,” said Shin-ichiro Fujii, team leader at Riken’s immunotherapy laboratory.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 Omicron raises infection risk on airlines
SOURCE	https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/12/22/airplane-passengers-at-least-twice-as-likely-to-catch-covid-19-because-of-omicron-airline-trade-body-says/?sh=8ee8bec536b8
GIST	<p>The omicron variant of the coronavirus raises the risk of infection on board a passenger plane by two or even three-fold, according to the airline industry’s biggest trade body, a finding that may foreshadow an exponential increase in cases as millions of travelers take to the skies to be with their families during the holiday season.</p> <p>KEY FACTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an interview with Bloomberg, the International Air Transport Association’s (IATA) medical adviser David Powell claimed that the risk of transmission on board a plane remains much lower than crowded places on the ground due to the use of hospital-grade air filters. • While encouraging passengers to maintain social distancing and mask-wearing, Powell said that a modern passenger jet is a “high-flow airflow environment,” which he said lowers the relative risk compared to places like pubs, gymnasiums, shopping centers or even airports. • Despite the purported higher risk of infection due to omicron, Powell said he believes getting a booster shot is more beneficial than not flying at all. • Powell also stated that leaving middle rows empty or having cabin crew wear full protective suits is unlikely to provide much benefit. <p>CRUCIAL QUOTE</p> <p>“The greatest protection you can give yourself is to be vaccinated and boosted. The protection that you give yourself from an extra mask or a different type of mask, or not flying at all, frankly, is probably less than the benefit you would get from just being fully boosted,” Powell told Bloomberg.</p> <p>TANGENT</p> <p>Last week, top executives from the major U.S. airlines—all IATA members—addressed a U.S. Senate Committee where all seemed to imply that wearing masks on flights may be unnecessary. Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly told the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation that “masks don’t add much” on planes. This is a departure from what Powell told Bloomberg on Tuesday where he implied that masking was a key mitigation measure against infections.</p> <p>KEY BACKGROUND</p> <p>Concerns about omicron have not led to a drop in domestic travel with United Airlines CEO Scott Kirby noting on Monday that the next two weeks will be the busiest for the airline since the start of the pandemic. Earlier this month, the American Automobile Association (AAA) also predicted that 6.4 million people will travel by air between December 23 and January 2—a 184% increase over the 2020 holiday season. The busy travel season has raised concerns that the ongoing omicron-fueled pandemic surge may see exponential growth at the start of the new year. On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that omicron has become the dominant variant in the U.S., accounting for 73.2% of new cases.</p> <p>SURPRISING FACT</p> <p>Online search trends on Google show that far fewer people in the U.S. are searching for the phrase “cancel flight” during this holiday season compared to August when the delta variant surge took hold across the U.S.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Hospitals face financial ruin: staffing crisis
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/other/us-hospitals-pushed-to-financial-ruin-as-nurses-quit-en-masse/ar-AAS1JqW
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- The U.S. health-care profession is suffering its own Great Resignation, pushing more hospitals into financial distress just as a winter surge of the coronavirus hits.</p> <p>Across the country, hospitals are buckling under the strain of nursing shortfalls and the spiraling cost of hiring replacements. For Watsonville Community Hospital on California's Central Coast, those costs became too much to bear, and contributed to the facility's bankruptcy this month, according to a person familiar with the situation.</p> <p>The shortages are most acute at hospitals like Watsonville that rely on government funding to treat poorer patients, since they have fewer resources to compete against the rising cost of keeping staff. The situation adds to the stress facilities have already experienced responding to the early onset of the virus, just as the last of federal aid is being doled out.</p> <p>"This is like survival stakes," said Steven Shill, head of the health-care practice at advisory firm BDO USA. Winners are "whoever's highest on the food chain and who has the biggest checkbook." The staffing companies -- agencies that provide nurses and other staff on a temporary basis -- are "really, really, really gouging hospitals."</p> <p>Saint John's Episcopal Hospital Chief Executive Officer Jerry Walsh has been on the losing side of those battles, beat out by larger, wealthier systems while laying out thousands of dollars a week more to pay what he calls "exorbitant" rates to outside agencies to keep his hospital properly staffed. St. John's, in a remote corner of Queens, treats some of the city's poorest and sickest patients and relies mainly on less-lucrative government-insured patients.</p> <p>"This is the worst nursing shortage that I have witnessed in my career," Maureen May, a 30-year veteran of the pediatric ICU and the president of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals, a union, said in an interview.</p> <p>The issue is emerging in the capital markets, too. Aveanna Healthcare Holdings Inc. went public in April in an effort to expand beyond its leading position in pediatric home health services. But a shortage of caregivers has pummeled its stock, while credit raters gave a debt issue to fund acquisitions low-tier junk level assessments.</p> <p>Insurers are trying to move patients out of hospitals more quickly due to the staffing shortages and have offered the home-care company premiums to do so, according to an emailed statement from Executive Chairman Rod Windley.</p> <p>The pain spreads beyond nurses. A report by human-resources firm Mercer this year estimated a shortfall of 3.2 million lower-wage workers, such as nursing assistants and home health aides, by 2026. Employers will also need to hire more than 1.1 million registered nurses in that period, Mercer said. Walsh said his hospital is also struggling to fill lab, respiratory therapist and administrative positions.</p> <p>The stakes also were evident at a Nov. 12 hearing for bankrupt nursing-home chain Gulf Coast Health Care, with the company pleading for permission to pay \$4 million to staffing agencies and other wages before compensating landlords and other creditors with a higher priority for payment. The homes were relying more on staffing from outside agencies to fill shortages, Gulf Coast lawyer David Hurst said, and one agency was threatening to cut off the company in a few days without payment.</p> <p>Hospital labor costs rose 12.6% in October over the year-ago period, according to consulting firm Kaufman Hall, further eating away at operating margins.</p>

Two-thirds of nurses surveyed by the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses said their experiences during the pandemic have prompted them to consider leaving the field. And 21% of those polled in a study for the American Nurses Foundation said they planned to resign within the next six months. Another 29% said they might.

Longstanding Problem

Unlike some other areas of the economy, in hospitals and other care facilities, staffing crunches have been a longstanding problem that the pandemic and its fallout have exacerbated.

“When we talk to our nurses, they are screaming about safe staffing,” said Scott Palmer, a spokesman for the Oregon Nurses Association, the result of years of underinvestment in everything from wages to training.

Another issue is the disconnect between wages for permanent nursing positions, which haven’t budged much, and temporary rates.

“Permanent jobs aren’t compelling enough for people to stay,” said Parth Bhakta, chief executive officer of digital health-care staffing company Vivian, whose website highlights traveling nurse positions that pay as much as \$13,000 a week. And why work in the ICU for \$30 an hour when you can take a retail job for \$25?

Bhakta predicts the strain on weaker systems means federal aid helping hospitals cope with Covid-19 will have to be extended.

“With aid ending, it’s going to be difficult to survive, and ultimately, the government is going to have to continue to step in,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/22 Health officials: 2021 deadlier than last year
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-pandemics-covid-19-pandemic-8117abd8e4367eaa6cb9b7ae78875734
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. health officials say 2021 is shaping up to be even deadlier than last year.</p> <p>It’s too early to say for sure, since all the death reports for November and December won’t be in for many weeks. But based on available information, it seems likely 2021 will surpass last year’s record number of deaths by at least 15,000, said Robert Anderson, who oversees the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s death statistics.</p> <p>Last year was the most lethal in U.S. history, due largely to the COVID-19 pandemic. A CDC report being released Wednesday shows 2020 was actually even worse than the agency previously reported.</p> <p>The report presents a final tally for last year of about 3.384 million U.S. deaths, about 25,000 more than a provisional count released earlier this year. Such jumps between provisional and final numbers are common, but 2020’s difference was higher than usual because of a lag in death records from some states that switched to new electronic reporting systems, Anderson said.</p> <p>The CDC this week also revised its estimate of life expectancy for 2020. Life expectancy at birth that year was 77 years, a decrease of 1.8 years from 2019. The agency previously estimated the decline at 1.5 years.</p> <p>Anderson said it’s likely that the nation will see more than 3.4 million deaths in 2021. Other experts said they think deaths for the year will end up either about the same as in 2020, or higher.</p> <p>“It’s really sad,” said Ali Mokdad, a mortality statistics expert at the University of Washington.</p>

A large reason is COVID-19, which hit the U.S. hard around March 2020 and became the nation's No. 3 cause of death, behind heart disease and cancer.

Last year, COVID-19 was the underlying cause in about 351,000 deaths. This year, the number is already at 356,000, and the final tally could hit 370,000, Anderson said.

Experts also think the 2021 numbers will be affected by a drug overdose epidemic that is expected to — for the first time — surpass 100,000 deaths in a calendar year.

An increase in annual deaths is not unusual. The annual count rose by nearly 16,000 from 2018 to 2019 — before COVID-19 appeared.

But the coronavirus clearly had an impact. The nation had the smallest population gain rate in history between July 2020 and July 2021, primarily because of the COVID-19 deaths, said Kenneth Johnson, a University of New Hampshire researcher.

Officials had hoped COVID-19 vaccines would slash the death count. But vaccinations became available gradually this year, with only 7 million fully vaccinated at the end of January and 63 million at the end of March.

Since then, many Americans have chosen not to get vaccinated. The CDC says 204 million Americans are fully vaccinated — or about 65% of the U.S. population that are age 5 and older and eligible for shots.

Indeed, that's a big part of why COVID-19 deaths could climb despite the availability of effective vaccines, Mokdad said. The appearance of new, more transmissible variants of the coronavirus only made the problem worse, he added.

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HEADLINE	12/22 FBI teams infiltrated Portland protests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/22/us/portland-protests-fbi-surveillance.html
GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. — In the hours after President Biden's inauguration this year, protesters marched once again through the streets of Portland, Ore., sending a message that putting a Democrat in the White House would not resolve their problems with a system of policing and corporate wealth that they saw as fundamentally unfair.</p> <p>"No cops, no prisons, total abolition," they chanted. Some of the activists, dressed in the trademark uniform of solid black clothing and masks that often signals a readiness to make trouble without being readily identifiable, smashed windows at the local Democratic Party headquarters.</p> <p>The event — like others that had consumed the city since the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in 2020 — included a variety of anarchists, antifascists, communists and racial justice activists. But there were others mingling in the crowd that day: plainclothes agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.</p> <p>The F.B.I. set up extensive surveillance operations inside Portland's protest movement, according to documents obtained by The New York Times and current and former federal officials, with agents standing shoulder to shoulder with activists, tailing vandalism suspects to guide the local police toward arrests and furtively videotaping inside one of the country's most active domestic protest movements.</p> <p>The breadth of F.B.I. involvement in Portland and other cities where federal teams were deployed at street protests became a point of concern for some within the bureau and the Justice Department who worried that it could undermine the First Amendment right to wage protest against the government, according to two officials familiar with the discussions.</p>

Some within the departments worried that the teams could be compared to F.B.I. surveillance transgressions of decades past, such as the [COINTELPRO projects](#) that sought to spy on and disrupt various activist groups in the 1950s and 1960s, according to the officials, one current and one former, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the debate.

There has been no evidence so far that the bureau used similar surveillance teams on right-wing demonstrators during the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, despite potential threats of violence against the heart of federal government — though the F.B.I. did have [an informant in the crowd that day](#). The bureau has at times used secretive tactics to disrupt right-wing violence, such as efforts that led to charges against men [accused of conspiring to kidnap Michigan's governor](#).

The F.B.I. has broad latitude to conduct surveillance when agents suspect threats to national security or that federal crimes may be committed. But bureau guidelines warn that agents should not cross into actions that could have a chilling effect on legitimate protest, and should instead prioritize less-intrusive techniques.

In Portland, federal teams were initially dispatched in July 2020 to protect the city's federal courthouse after protesters lit fires, smashed windows and lobbed fireworks at law enforcement personnel in the area. One demonstrator had [attacked a federal officer with a hammer](#). But the F.B.I. role quickly widened, persisting months after activists turned their attention away from the courthouse, with some targeting storefronts or local institutions whose protection would normally be up to the local police.

Both local and federal law enforcement officials have complained that lawful peaceful protests were hijacked in many cases by criminals.

But organizers of the protests and civil rights groups, after being told of The Times's findings, said that surveillance agents recording and following protesters in the midst of a demonstration was a form of domestic spying.

"These are all insidious tactics that chill First Amendment expression and erode trust with local officials," said Bobbin Singh, executive director of the Oregon Justice Resource Center, one of several civil rights organizations that objected to the mass arrests and violent crackdowns that followed the protests. He called the government's operations an "alarming" misuse of resources.

Kieran L. Ramsey, the F.B.I.'s special agent in charge of the Portland field office, said the office was committed to pursuing "violent instigators who exploit legitimate, peaceful protests and engage in violations of federal law."

"At all times, our focus was on those planning or committing significant criminal activity or acts of violence," Mr. Ramsey said in a statement.

Police officers made more than 1,000 arrests during the course of the protests, and more than 200 people ultimately faced criminal prosecution; more than 100 cases had to be dropped because there was not sufficient evidence.

In fast-moving street gatherings where people concealed their identities and demanded that cameras not be present, working invisibly inside the crowd may have given the authorities more opportunity to identify and apprehend those engaging in the most serious mayhem.

In one case, F.B.I. agents in plain clothing were credited in court records with helping catch a man accused of throwing Molotov cocktails at law enforcement officers. He faced federal explosives charges in addition to state charges that included attempted murder.

The F.B.I. teams continued their operations among Portland's far-left activists for months at the end of 2020 and the start of 2021. While the F.B.I. has also been investigating far-right groups, some lawmakers have blasted the bureau for failing to detect and blunt the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Renn Cannon, who was the Portland office's special agent in charge during the demonstrations until he departed early this year, said in an interview that there were persistent protest-related crimes and tense political dynamics, leaving the bureau to try to address the crimes while also upholding First Amendment rights.

"I thought a lot about what is allowed under the Constitution," Mr. Cannon said. "How do you do surveillance effectively, safely and legally? That was something we spent a lot of time on."

Mr. Cannon declined to discuss specific operations or tactics but said he believed that his agents had crossed no lines while trying to make sure that laws were enforced.

In the middle of his re-election campaign, President Donald J. Trump vowed to "dominate" protesters who had taken to the streets in the wake of Mr. Floyd's death, and he directed federal agencies to deploy personnel to protect federal property around the country. Outrage and even larger mass protests ensued in Portland after videos showed federal agents in tactical gear [seizing people off the streets into unmarked vehicles](#) and one agent [beating a Navy veteran](#) with a baton.

F.B.I. officials heeded the call for action. David L. Bowdich, who was then the F.B.I.'s second-in-command, had called the protests after Mr. Floyd's murder "[a national crisis](#)" in a memo. He likened the situation to Sept. 11 and suggested that the bureau could make federal criminal cases against protesters by using the Hobbs Act — a law from the 1940s that was designed to crack down on racketeering in labor groups.

The F.B.I. director, Christopher A. Wray, told lawmakers in September 2020 that the bureau was pursuing "quite a number of properly predicated domestic terrorism investigations into violent anarchist extremists, any number of whom self-identify with the antifa movement."

The F.B.I. is aggressively investigating people associated with violent far-right groups such as Atomwaffen and the Base, and prosecutors have already brought charges against dozens of members of the far-right Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers militia in connection with the attack on the Capitol. Federal agents are actively pursuing additional cases against those groups and further charges are likely to be filed.

Those investigations have sometimes involved confidential informants and surveillance. But no other evidence has emerged that F.B.I. agents in recent years had blended into crowds engaged in political protests in the streets.

Later, after the overt federal crackdown in Portland ebbed and protest crowds waned, smaller groups of activists continued demonstrations that frequently included smashed windows and fires at buildings such as the headquarters of the Portland Police Association.

Agents from the F.B.I. were still on the ground. In early November 2020, according to records reviewed by The Times, federal agents at one demonstration were "conducting surveillance in the crowd." As a group marched near the Portland State University campus, [some in the crowd shattered windows at a Starbucks](#).

An F.B.I. special agent who reported being "in a plainclothes surveillance capacity" described witnessing one of the demonstrators break out a Starbucks window with a tire iron before placing the tire iron back inside his backpack, according to a written Portland Police Bureau summary of the federal agent's account. In the report, the police officer wrote that he had been asked not to identify the federal agent's name in documents.

The following week, according to an email between an F.B.I. agent and a Portland police officer, F.B.I. agents were again in the crowd conducting surveillance. One of the F.B.I. agents captured a 30-minute video of the scene as he appeared to stand next to a crowd of demonstrators while others smashed

windows at a Democratic Party building. The video shows the agent then joining the crowd as it marched down the street.

One of the agents later reported in records seeing an agent from the Department of Homeland Security also on the scene.

Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, who has been scrutinizing the federal response to Portland, said in an interview that while federal officers have a right and a responsibility to protect federal property, there should be a high bar when it comes to agencies surveilling political gatherings.

“The Department of Justice needs to explain to me why it deployed those teams and provide a real record of their activities,” Mr. Wyden said. “What were they there for? Were they there primarily to chill peaceful protesters, or were they there to protect federal property?”

At the Inauguration Day demonstration in January, about 200 people gathered. “We are ungovernable,” one of their signs said.

Local and federal law enforcement records show that about half a dozen federal agents were there that day, with at least some of them doing what was described as surveillance in which they planned to follow protesters who engaged in property crimes or violence — even though the protest that day was starting on the east side of the city, far from the federal properties downtown. Agents singled out and tracked several people who had broken windows, trailing the individuals for several blocks until local law enforcement agents detained them.

Four agents testified before a local grand jury that was considering indictments against protesters who had been arrested. A person familiar with the proceedings said one of the agents testified that the federal officers had been wearing black apparel, a fact that suggests the agents were attempting to disguise themselves as protesters. F.B.I. officials declined to discuss specific tactics or clothing used during their operations.

Prosecutors obtained indictments for six people on riot and criminal mischief charges.

Mike German, a former F.B.I. special agent who specialized in domestic terrorism and covert operations and is now a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice, said that such surveillance operations inherently run the risk of violating First Amendment rights. They should be used only when there is evidence that a serious crime may occur, he said, and they should be tailored to focus on obtaining the evidence needed to prosecute that crime.

“The F.B.I. should focus its resources on groups engaged in deadly violence, not vandals,” he said. Mr. Cannon, the former F.B.I. supervisor in Portland, said the bureau was indeed worried about acts of violence directed at the police, the potential that the protests could escalate and the toll the demonstrations were taking on the Portland Police Bureau, whose officers were fatigued after months of near-nightly confrontations on the streets.

“This was a wave of protest-related crimes that had a severe impact on the community,” Mr. Cannon said. “There was a lot of pressure. It was a fraught situation.”

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HEADLINE	12/22 China locks down 200,000 for 1 virus case
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/22/china-covid-border-supply-chains/
GIST	<p>In response to a single case of the coronavirus, Chinese authorities locked down a border city of more than 200,000 people this week, suspended schools and businesses and barred the entry of all goods and people.</p> <p>The city of Dongxing, which borders Vietnam in China’s southern Guangxi province, on Wednesday ordered all households to quarantine at home until further notice after a resident tested positive during a</p>

routine screening, according to state broadcaster CCTV. Schools, public transportation and most businesses, except for supermarkets and pharmacies, were temporarily shuttered as authorities launched a campaign to test everyone in the city.

Customs processing in the city, the entry point for a million tons of goods annually from Vietnam, was also halted while the Chinese Embassy in Hanoi asked Chinese citizens in Vietnam not to return by land.

The extreme response to one case underlines China's hypervigilance as Beijing prepares to host the Winter Olympics in February amid new local cases of the omicron variant.

China's pursuit of a stringent "zero covid" policy has resulted in increasingly strict border controls and quarantines and frequent lockdowns. According to Vietnam's state-controlled Hanoi Times, more than 6,000 trucks carrying fruit have been stranded along the Chinese-Vietnamese border for several weeks.

Seven omicron cases have been detected in China over the past two weeks, just before Lunar New Year when millions of residents would normally travel home to spend the holiday with family. Officials — wary of forcing pandemic-weary residents to miss a third Lunar New Year in a row — are strongly urging citizens "celebrate on the spot" and avoid going home. On Monday, Lei Zhenglong, deputy director of China's National Health Commission, ordered officials not to let the country's defenses against omicron relax "in the slightest."

In Xi'an in Shaanxi province, tens of thousands of residents were ordered to quarantine following outbreaks this month of the coronavirus and hemorrhagic fever, a seasonal disease caused by the hantavirus. Authorities were struggling to manage angry and frustrated residents as citywide testing got underway. On Wednesday, the city's "health code" system, a QR-based tracking app that residents must show before entering public spaces or traveling, had collapsed after being overloaded with traffic.

On social media, residents complained that they were not able to ride public transportation or get into their apartment compounds because of the health code system's failure. In lieu of the app, which includes residents' vaccine status and recent coronavirus test results, some companies resorted to having [employees sign written statements](#) declaring they are not infected.

Authorities have required all residents leaving the city to present an official letter from local authorities allowing them to board departing trains. One resident stranded in the Xi'an North Railway Station described the confusing and contradicting array of rules on the social network Weibo, in a post that was later erased.

"Waited an hour for a nucleic acid test. After buying my ticket, I was told I would need a special certificate from my local neighborhood office," the post began. "Took an hour bus to that office where someone told me no certificate was needed. Took another hour bus back to the train station where I was told to go back to my neighborhood office. Went back. By then, my nucleic acid test was no longer valid. Waited in line again for another test. Took the result to the neighborhood office who told me to go to the subdistrict office for a letter. Staff there said the leaders were discussing. I waited and waited and waited. Then my covid test expired again."

Another Weibo user in Xi'an expressed similar sentiments. "These days I feel distress, anger and helplessness," the person wrote.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Companies, attendees drop out tech show
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/12/21/ces-covid/
GIST	Just two weeks before it is set to open its doors to tens of thousands of people at the massive Las Vegas Convention Center, one of the largest technology trade shows is in limbo.

CES is struggling with a growing number of dropouts of worried exhibitors, attendees and media as omicron cases are on the rise. On Tuesday, companies including Facebook parent company Meta, Amazon, T-Mobile and Twitter pulled out, along with most major tech-focused publications including CNET, the Verge and TechCrunch.

The conference is still scheduled to take place Jan. 5 through 8. CES organizers said they were comfortable holding it in person due to its health measures, lower attendance and social distancing measures.

The show went fully remote last January in the thick of the winter [coronavirus](#) surge, but is typically a sprawling in-person networking event featuring everything from cuddly robots to self-driving cars. Hosted by the Consumer Technology Association, CES (formerly the Consumer Electronics Show) attracted more than 170,000 attendees the year before the pandemic. In January 2020, it spread across 2.9 million square feet of exhibit space and had 4,419 exhibitors.

This year, the conference required vaccines and masks for all attendees for the nearly entirely indoors conference. According to the CTA, more than 2,100 exhibitors were lined up for 2022. Meta, Google's Waymo, AT&T and Samsung were among some of its biggest names.

The highly contagious omicron variant changed plans quickly. The coronavirus variant accounted for 73 percent of new cases in the United States between Dec. 12 and 18, according to modeled projections from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"Out of an abundance of caution and care for our employees, we won't be attending CES in person due to the evolving public health concerns related to covid-19," said Meta spokesperson Kamran Mumtaz. The company plans to still participate virtually.

Amazon said late Tuesday it was pulling out of the in-person event. "The health and safety of our employees is our top priority. Due to the quickly shifting situation and uncertainty around the omicron variant, we will no longer have an on-site presence at CES," said spokesperson Sarah Sobolewski. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

T-Mobile also announced it was no longer attending on Tuesday, saying in a blog post: "While we are confident that CES organizers are taking exhaustive measures to protect in-person attendees and we had many preventative practices in place as well, we are prioritizing the safety of our team and other attendees with this decision."

Samsung was still undecided about the event.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Washington's new capital gains tax
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/politics/2021/12/washington-states-new-capital-gains-tax-primer
GIST	<p>After a decade of failed attempts, Democrats in Washington's Legislature finally managed to pass a capital gains tax, which kicks in Jan. 1.</p> <p>Republicans have fiercely opposed the tax, which applies to profits from selling assets, such as stocks and bonds. They say it will make Washington a less attractive place to do business. GOP lawmakers have also criticized it as a step toward taxing income more broadly.</p> <p>Democrats, meanwhile, have called the capital gains tax a necessary step toward making the state's tax system more fair — particularly in a state like Washington, which doesn't tax income.</p> <p>Now, with the capital gains tax on the verge of becoming reality, it faces legal challenges that could compromise Democrats' vision of imposing higher taxes on the wealthy.</p>

Here's a look at what the tax does, who will pay, and where it stands legally.

How the tax works

The 7% capital gains tax applies to profits from selling long-term assets, such as stocks and bonds. For the tax to kick in, an individual or married couple's profits from these types of sales have to exceed \$250,000 in a year.

Even then, the tax applies only to capital gains above the \$250,000 threshold. That means if you made \$260,000 from selling stocks in a given year, you would pay the tax on \$10,000 of that amount, making for a total capital-gains tax payment of \$700.

The \$250,000 exemption threshold is set to increase annually by the rate of inflation.

While the tax becomes effective Jan. 1, the first payments won't be due until early 2023.

Who pays

Most likely, not you.

In addition to the tax applying only to capital gains above \$250,000 per year, many transactions are entirely exempt. These include sales of real estate, retirement accounts, timber and livestock used in farming or ranching. Sales of family-owned businesses get a special deduction, too.

For those reasons, the state Department of Revenue estimates that only about 0.2% of Washington taxpayers would actually pay the tax. That's 7,000 people.

What it will pay for

Money from the tax is supposed to bankroll an early education bill, The Fair Start For Kids Act. That law, which the Legislature also approved in 2021, increases how much the state reimburses child care providers to better match the actual cost of providing childcare.

The new law also aims to make child care more affordable by reducing copays and opening up state-funded child care slots to more people.

State Sen. June Robinson, D-Everett, said state lawmakers have wanted to make big investments in early learning for years, but didn't have a steady stream of income to make it happen. She called putting the tax money toward preschool and early childhood programs "the best investment that a state and a country can make."

"There is really strong research that shows the connection between quality early learning and high school graduation, completing education beyond high school, lower involvement with the criminal justice system — just all those good things," said Robinson, who was the prime sponsor of the capital gains tax bill in the Legislature.

Initially, the capital gains tax is expected to raise about \$500 million per year that can be used only for K-12 education and early-learning programs. Tax collections above \$500 million are to be placed in a school construction account, which pays for school buildings. The amount of money set aside for education programs is set to increase each year by the inflation rate.

Legal argument against the tax

Past court decisions in Washington state have classified income as a type of property. And the state constitution says property must be taxed uniformly — as in, not charging people different rates based on their income level.

Now, two lawsuits are moving forward that aim to overturn the capital gains tax, arguing it is an unconstitutional tax on income. Those two lawsuits, both filed in Douglas County Superior Court, have been consolidated and are moving forward together.

Former state Attorney General Rob McKenna represents one group of plaintiffs challenging the capital gains tax. He said the tax is essentially a graduated tax on income, since it targets one group of people with high earnings, but exempts others. That kind of tax is unconstitutional, McKenna said, because it doesn't tax income at a flat, uniform rate.

Moreover, McKenna said, voters in Washington state have repeatedly rejected income taxes, including ones that target the wealthy. Several of those measures would have altered the state constitution to allow for graduated income taxes.

McKenna and many Republican lawmakers see the capital gains tax as Democrats' way of testing whether the court will reverse its past opinions, opening the door to broader taxes on wealth and income.

"There's nothing new here," McKenna told Crosscut in an interview last week. "People just keep recycling the same ideas to get around the fundamental problem, which is that the voters of this state don't want an income tax."

Legal argument for the tax

Lawyers for the state, meanwhile, argue that the capital gains tax isn't an income tax, but an excise tax, which applies to the sale or transfer of property. Those types of taxes are legal in Washington state — and the capital gains tax is no different, according to the state's legal filings.

The state also argues that the Legislature was rightly concerned with the unfairness of Washington state's tax system when it passed the capital gains tax earlier this year. Because Washington's tax code relies heavily on sales and property taxes, it is highly regressive, meaning that low and middle-income people pay a higher share of their income in taxes than the very wealthy.

"In imposing the capital gains tax on those with the greatest ability to pay, [the tax] is a small but important step toward rebalancing the state's tax code," the state wrote in its court filing.

What's next

A hearing on the consolidated capital gains tax lawsuits is scheduled for early February. After that, a Douglas County judge will issue a ruling on the tax constitutionality — but that's not expected to be the end of the matter.

The state will almost certainly appeal the lower court's ruling. The case is expected to be decided by the state Supreme Court.

That process will likely take many more months.

If the tax is ultimately struck down, state legislators will have to find a different source of funding for the newly approved investments in early childhood education.

But that's something they most likely won't have to deal with until 2023, at the earliest.

While state legislators are scheduled to hold a 60-day session beginning Jan. 10, the final ruling on the capital gains tax won't come until long after they are scheduled to adjourn their 2022 session, which is slated to run through March.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Hawaii travel restrictions, test requirements
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/hawaii/article/Hawaii-COVID-travel-restrictions-test-requirements-16717085.php
GIST	Cases of COVID-19 are surging in Hawaii, with 707 new cases reported on Saturday and 972 new cases on Sunday.

It's a mix of the delta and omicron variants being transmitted at large gatherings, said State Health Director Dr. Libby Char in a [press release](#). Of the 972, 877 were on Oahu, 38 were on Maui, 29 were on Hawaii Island, and 14 were on Kauai. Future updates to Hawaii's COVID-19 counts may be found on the Department of Health's [website](#).

"We are definitely concerned," Gov. Ige [told Hawaii News Now](#). "The increasing number of cases, we did anticipate, but certainly we want to remind everyone that the best way out of this pandemic is to get vaccinated."

No plans have been announced by state or county leaders to add any restrictions.

Currently, all travelers entering Hawaii must follow the [State of Hawaii Safe Travels program](#). It includes a required online health form, temperature screening and a 10-day quarantine unless you receive a vaccination exception by uploading your card digitally for validation or you receive a negative pre-travel COVID-19 test within 72 hours of your departure time. For multi-city flight itineraries, you'll have to ensure the 72 hours prior to departure time is from the last leg of your itinerary to Hawaii.

If you choose not to participate in the Safe Travels program, you will be required to quarantine for 10 days.

- Info: Find the latest information on travel to the islands from [Hawaii's COVID-19 travel site](#).
- Testing: Get details on Hawaii's [pre-travel testing program](#).
- Form: Fill out the [health form](#) needed to visit Hawaii.

As of June 15, 2021, there's no longer an inter-island quarantine, so you can travel between Islands without restriction after you meet initial arrival requirements.

On Nov. 29, 2021, Hawaii Governor Ige issued an emergency proclamation [easing COVID rules](#), but the Safe Travels program requirements and indoor mask mandate will continue. It did, however, end capacity limits on social gatherings, restaurants, bars and gyms. The proclamation also allows each county to manage their own COVID regulations without state approval.

"One significant change in the emergency proclamation is that I will no longer require county coordination of their emergency orders," said Ige in a November press conference.

This means, moving forward, rules for Maui County (Maui, Molokai, and Lanai), Oahu, Hawaii Island, and Kauai may differ in some ways, as mayors are responsible for their own county regulations.

Oahu is the most lenient, having no capacity for large events whether indoor or outdoor. [Restaurants](#) are also no longer required to do contact tracing or adhere to physical distancing. Proof of full vaccination or verification of a negative COVID-19 test are required to [dine indoors](#) at restaurants.

Similarly, Maui County has dropped capacity limits for restaurants and also requires proof of vaccination or a negative test for indoor dining. Events with 75 or more people [require an exemption](#) from Maui County.

Kauai and Hawaii counties still have indoor capacity limits. Kauai County has gathering limits of 40 indoors and 100 outdoors. Any events more than that must have an event coordinator who can manage vaccine and COVID-19 test regulations. Hawaii Island [has set](#) its indoor max capacity at 25 and outdoor max to 100.

If you're flying to Hawaii during the holidays and worried about regulations changing, check in advance with the airline and keep track of [Honolulu](#), [Maui](#), [Kauai](#) and [Hawaii](#) county mandates by visiting their respective websites.

HEADLINE	12/21 Health leaders: booster shots immediately
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/washington-health-leaders-urge-booster-shots-immediately-as-omicron-covid-cases-surge/
GIST	<p>All eligible Washingtonians should get their COVID-19 booster shots “immediately” to protect themselves this winter and limit the ongoing spread of the new omicron variant, a panel of state health officials urged Tuesday morning.</p> <p>It’s still too early to make broad projections about how quickly omicron will spread this winter and where in the state it’ll hit hardest, state health leaders say, but infections have been on the rise in the past few weeks, according to state epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist.</p> <p>He pointed specifically to recent COVID-19 outbreaks linked to high-school wrestling tournaments earlier this month, which infected more than 200 athletes, coaches, referees and attendees — some of whom got sick with the omicron variant.</p> <p>Hospitalizations and deaths remain consistent, but Washingtonians will likely be in for a “difficult winter” of both influenza and omicron because health care systems are already strained, Lindquist said at a Tuesday news briefing.</p> <p>As of Tuesday morning, the state had confirmed at least 400 omicron cases, Lindquist added, noting the new variant hasn’t yet overtaken delta cases throughout Washington.</p> <p>“Our early surveillance from a lab standpoint was very much related to detecting omicron in our state and then having a better view of where it was in our state,” state Health Secretary Dr. Umair A. Shah said. “Now we have to shift to do more representative sampling across the entire state so we can get a better picture of how and where it’s spreading.”</p> <p>Statewide, about 81.7% of residents 12 and older — about 5.4 million people — have received at least one vaccine dose, while about 75.3% are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“That’s amazing,” Shah said. “However, it is so critical now that people get boosters. ... We know we have waning immunity. Over time, those vaccines will need to get boosted.”</p> <p>About 1.7 million Washingtonians had received an additional vaccine dose as of Tuesday.</p> <p>Shah also, however, acknowledged recent challenges in securing booster appointments throughout the state, assuring residents the state Department of Health is working with Gov. Jay Inslee’s office to take “aggressive” steps to increase appointment capacity.</p> <p>“We’re very concerned about vaccine appointment availability,” Shah said. “You’re frustrated. We know that. And we’re doing everything we can to alleviate the system.”</p> <p>Shah also asked those who have multiple vaccine appointments to cancel them, especially if they’ve already decided on a specific site. He also urged Washingtonians not to wait for the “perfect booster.”</p> <p>“The best booster is the one being offered to you,” Shah said.</p> <p>More information about increasing capacity for booster appointments will be available in the next couple days, according to Shah. In the meantime, he said, masking, distancing, avoiding crowds and getting tested for the virus will be important.</p> <p>“This pandemic is far from over,” Shah said. “Omicron is the latest reminder of that. There are some very, very basic things you can do to empower yourselves and your families to help protect them.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 CDC vaccine data raises questions
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-12-21/uneven-reporting-raises-doubts-about-cdc-vaccination-numbers
GIST	<p>Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention points to a positive trend: More than 1 million coronavirus vaccine doses on average have been administered everyday for well over a month.</p> <p>But a closer look at CDC's vaccine tracker raises questions.</p> <p>Kaiser Health News this month reported that the tracker showed 99.9% of people ages 65 and older had at least their first shot – a number that experts said couldn't be correct.</p> <p>The CDC responded by quietly instituting a cap across the demographic groups they measure that, on paper, prevents any group from exceeding a vaccination rate of 95%. Its tracker now shows that 95% of those 65 and older are at least partially vaccinated instead of 99.9%.</p> <p>A new footnote explains that the cap “helps address potential overestimates of vaccination coverage due to first, second, and booster doses that were not linked.” It also notes that inaccuracies could arise from part-time residents getting the shots and potential data reporting errors. The agency did not respond to a comment request.</p> <p>But experts say CDC's strategy does not solve underlying data issues that could spawn massive miscounts and that it's important for vaccination coverage data to be accurate so that public health policies can be targeted to where they are most needed.</p> <p>“We need to know where our vulnerable populations are,” says William Moss, the executive director of the International Vaccine Access Center at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. “We need to know where to divert resources. ... With variations in data at the state level, it's just very hard to do all that at the federal level or at the national level.”</p> <p>Discrepancies in CDC, State and County Vaccine Data</p> <p>Limiting vaccine coverage to 95% in the CDC vaccine tracker doesn't address the root of the problem, says Howard Forman, a professor of public health at Yale University School of Medicine.</p> <p>The cap “just says that we're not fools, and we don't think for a minute that it's 100%,” Forman says.</p> <p>The CDC's data tracker estimates that more than 56 million Americans ages 65 and older have had at least one shot, while the latest Census Bureau data from 2019 estimates that only 54 million people are even in that age group.</p> <p>And the agency's data doesn't line up with what states and counties are reporting in several cases.</p> <p>For example, CDC has capped California's percent of the population aged 65 or older with at least one shot at 95%, but state data shows about 87% of this population has had at least one dose.</p> <p>CDC has also capped Florida's 65 and older population at 95% with at least one shot, but the state reports about 90% of the population is at least partially vaccinated.</p> <p>Based on Census Bureau data on senior citizen populations across the two states, even just a 5% discrepancy would amount to hundreds of thousands of residents in that demographic alone whose vaccination statuses are misidentified.</p> <p>Both state health departments in statements provided to U.S. News said that CDC has access to additional databases, including vaccine rates from federal facilities, that could change their numbers.</p> <p>Experts say that part of the problem is the lack of standardization in state reporting.</p>

“I think one place where the United States has really kind of failed is in having standards for state reporting so that we can readily compare numbers across states,” Moss says.

State reporting disparities have been a problem with testing and infection numbers, too, according to Moss.

“There has been such diversity in reporting across states that has made it really difficult to track the pandemic and compare data across states,” Moss says.

County level data doesn’t always line up, either.

Georgia’s Chattahoochee County appears to be the most vaccinated county in the U.S. – but the number of vaccinated people is four times as large as its population. The real full vaccination rate is 20%, [according to the state’s dashboard](#). A spokesperson from the Georgia Department of Public Health said that the CDC is counting additional vaccinations from the Fort Benning military base.

Similarly, in Portsmouth, Virginia, CDC data shows about 30,000 more fully vaccinated people than the [state dashboard](#). Melissa Gordon, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Health, explained that the mistake happened because CDC is counting doses that the Naval Medical Center administered to non-residents.

“CDC is aware of a technical issue impacting some of Virginia’s COVID-19 vaccine administration data. ... CDC is working to resolve this issue, and has provided Virginia with the correct data files for the VDH dashboard,” Gordon said.

West Feliciana Parish in Louisiana, home to the state penitentiary, is listed as having a full vaccination rate of 84% in the CDC data, which would put it leagues above the rest of the state. But Louisiana’s own [data dashboard](#) indicates that the vaccination rate is 61% as of Monday. In six other Louisiana parishes, the difference between vaccination rates in the state data and the CDC data is 10 percentage points or greater. Mindy Faciane, a spokesperson for the Louisiana Department of Health, could not provide a reason for this discrepancy but noted that “the state dashboard will have the most accurate data.”

This is not to say that the CDC data is always less reliable than state dashboards. Some states don’t count shots from federal sources, which means the CDC’s data is more complete in those cases. For example, [Arizona’s dashboard](#) doesn’t count people who got their vaccine from the Indian Health Service, leading to serious undercounting in areas of the state that are part of the Navajo Nation. In this case, the CDC data is more accurate.

What’s Causing the Inconsistencies?

Several issues can lead to inflated vaccination rates in the CDC’s [online database](#). The biggest issue is how the agency calculates its partial vaccination rate – the share of people who have received at least one dose.

When the CDC calculates the percentage of people in a county who are fully vaccinated, it only counts people who are residents of that county. But when it calculates the percentage of people in the county who are partially vaccinated, it counts people who are residents of that state.

The method of calculation can inflate the partial vaccination rate, since it counts people who drove in from another county to get a vaccine. For example, 13 counties in the CDC’s data list more people with one dose than the actual population.

Vaccination rates may also be slightly inflated in areas where the population is undercounted. The CDC uses 2019 population data from the Census, and historically it’s been more difficult for the Census to accurately count how many people live in areas with mostly Latino or non-white populations.

“The whole Rio Grande area has been undercounted forever. ... I think that's why our rates are higher, because the number of people that we think are living here, it's not accurate,” says Marisol Resendez, director of the El Milagro Clinic in McAllen, Texas.

The CDC also reports that booster shots are complicating the picture. In a footnote, the agency said that many people who got their initial vaccine doses in one location are getting a booster shot in a different location, so their booster shot might appear as a first dose when reported to the CDC.

“This is just one example of how CDC’s data may overestimate first doses and underestimate booster doses,” the footnote said.

The agency should be working to address the data issues beyond just the 95% cap, according to Forman. “This is not a one-time problem,” he says. “It's going to go on and on and on.”

More Shots in Arms – Mostly From Boosters

Regardless of some inconsistencies, experts say CDC’s data is still helpful for spotting trends, and one trend that can’t be ignored is the increasing number of vaccines administered in the U.S.

The U.S. is averaging around 1.4 million doses administered per day, though the majority of the shots administered are booster doses. It’s an increase of more than 600,000 over the average reported two months ago in mid-October.

As omicron spreads, U.S. health officials have urged people to get booster shots, saying the additional shots from Pfizer and Moderna [likely work](#) against the new variant.

According to [data](#) from the Biden administration, more than 1.1 million vaccine doses were administered on Monday, with boosters accounting for nearly 660,000 of those shots.

The increase is being driven by a number of factors, including the simplification of who is eligible for booster doses, according to Moss.

“We started off with a rather complex and cumbersome eligibility criteria with the CDC distinguishing who should get booster doses and who may get booster doses,” Moss says.

Citing concerns about omicron, agencies have expanded booster shots to [all adults](#) and [16- and 17-year-olds](#).

Fear over the variant could also be causing an uptick in shots, but it's more likely leading to more booster doses than initial shots, according to Moss.

“I suspect that most of that fear is translating into people who are already fully vaccinated getting booster doses, and it's not clear that that fear is driving unvaccinated individuals to get vaccinated,” he says.

Experts are concerned that hospitalization rates are increasing going into winter months as omicron [takes over](#). They say that booster shots are beneficial but that getting more people their first dose is the most important thing.

“The real challenge we're facing here in the United States is getting the unvaccinated vaccinated. And there, I think, the progress has been slow,” Moss says.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Seattle police, fire staffing critically low
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3289571/rantz-seattle-police-fire-staffing-covid/
GIST	Seattle Police and Fire are still dangerously understaffed, COVID is spreading amongst some staff, and city residents are not fully protected. The city refuses to budge on its vaccine mandate, even as it brings back policies previously used to accommodate staff before the vaccine was available.

The SPD has hundreds of open shifts across every precinct in the city. In one precinct alone, it is down officers in nearly 100 shifts between now and the end of the year. When you remove new hires and recruits who are not patrol-ready, updated staffing numbers from last week show only 888 total deployable officers.

Meanwhile, the situation is so dire with the Seattle Fire Department, the city just had to turn six units offline and convert engines into aid units. Despite a deployable staff in full compliance with the city's vaccine mandate, SFD had recent COVID cases forcing the department to return to the very procedures the city claimed it couldn't use to protect the unvaccinated.

The police staffing nightmare

As a result of historic officer separations and a vaccine mandate that sidelined nearly 100 officers, the SPD has struggled to meet basic staffing minimums. These minimums are based on what they think is enough staff to keep both the public and officers safe on any given shift.

There are dozens of open shifts asking non-patrol officers, like detectives, to volunteer for open shifts. There isn't a single watch or precinct in Seattle that is able to meet minimum staffing without augmenting patrols.

In the Southwest Precinct alone, between December 20 and December 31, both 2nd and 3rd Watch is down officers in nearly 100 shifts.

Seattle Fire makes drastic staffing move

The SFD was down 19 staff on Saturday, December 18, forcing the city into drastic cuts to service.

The department removed two aid cars, one ladder truck, two engines, and one air unit from service as a result. But they also had to change the configuration of other units to keep the department from semi-functioning. SFD took three engines that are regularly staffed with four firefighter/EMTs and converted them to aid cars staffed with two firefighter/EMTs.

A source from SFD warned that aid cars "are not equipped with the personnel or the equipment to make a rescue or extinguish the fire."

While a spokesperson with SFD confirmed all of these details, she noted "the members staffing those units carry their turnout gear and can respond to fires with other units."

"[If] a fire were to occur in one of those districts staffed instead with an aid car, the closest engine company(s) and truck(s) would respond in to help cover that area," the spokesperson said in an email to the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.

The spokesperson attributed the staff shortage to "employees being out on leave (sick leave, vacation leave, extended leave, etc.), retirements and special events." She acknowledges that the vaccine mandate is playing a role in the staffing shortage, but "it would not be accurate to attribute all of our understaffing to the mandate, as we had to occasionally put rigs out of service before the mandate deadline passed in October."

Prior to the mandate, SFD suffered a staffing shortage. The vaccine mandate made it worse. It appears to have been for naught.

COVID spreads and old procedures return to SFD as omicron hits

Even though the remaining SFD staff is fully compliant with the vaccine mandate, staff are still getting COVID.

Eight SFD personnel tested positive for COVID-19 in November 2021. According to a public disclosure request, all eight were vaccinated.

Omicron is now the dominant COVID variant in the United States. While studies and anecdotal evidence suggest omicron is significantly less dangerous than delta, leading to symptoms of a mild cold in most people, it's more contagious. More troublesome from a staffing perspective, omicron appears to evade our vaccines.

Consequently, the SFD instituted new measures to protect staff from omicron. It's going back to policies adopted early in the pandemic.

New SFD procedures ruffle feathers

SFD Chief Harold Scoggins detailed a return to old procedures in a December 17 memo. It reads (in part): To protect each other, effective immediately, members should return to the level of vigilance that was exercised in the earliest days of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Masking and social distancing are crucial. In addition, members are also authorized and encouraged to use the POCCT tests in the Station at the start of each shift to add another layer of protection. These tests are offered on a voluntary basis and not a substitute for masking and distancing. No test is perfect, but the POCCT tests detect contagious people close to 80% of the time.

This memo is not sitting well with some vaccinated and unvaccinated firefighters.

To justify terminating firefighters who did not comply with the vaccine mandate, staff were told these very policies could not be a substitute for the unvaccinated.

But if omicron evades the vaccine and the best protection, according to the city, is to abide by procedures used before a vaccine was even available, then what sense did it make to fire unvaccinated staff? They're just as vulnerable to the dominant variant as the vaccinated.

Unethical negotiation strategy with the union?

The city is negotiating with the Seattle Police Officers Guild (SPOG) over what to do with the sidelined officers who were denied accommodation requests to avoid the vaccine.

One source tells the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH that Mayor Jenny Durkan is not considering a move to allow for frequent testing for those who do not wish to be vaccinated, even though that option was available before her mandate.

Seattle city leaders have also refused to meet for a collective bargaining session until late this week, according to another source to the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. It is an apparent move to pressure officers who are burning through accrued sick or vacation time as they wait to see if SPOG can strike a deal.

If they run out of time off and do not yet have a job to lateral to another department, the officers may give in and submit their paperwork. While that ensures their return to work, it could also result in significant resentment. They could leave the department as soon as they're offered another position in another department.

Meanwhile, firefighters are reportedly still being fired. One source tells the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH that some firefighters are on disability to treat medical issues that occurred on the job. Once they get off disability, if not vaccinated, they're being terminated.

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HEADLINE	12/21 WHO Europe chief: brace; significant surge
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/whos-europe-chief-says-another-storm-coming-as-omicron-takes-hold
GIST	The World Health Organization's European head has warned countries to brace for a "significant surge" in Covid-19 cases as Omicron spreads, and advised the widespread use of boosters for protection.

Since it emerged in late November, [Omicron](#) has been detected in at least 38 of the 53 countries in the WHO's European region and is already dominant in several of them, including Denmark, Portugal and the United Kingdom, Hans Kluge told a news conference in Vienna on Tuesday.

"We can see another storm coming," said Kluge. "Within weeks, Omicron will dominate in more countries of the region, pushing already stretched health systems further to the brink."

The WHO's [Europe](#) region includes Russia and other former Soviet republics, as well as Turkey.

WHO data shows the region has in recent weeks reported the highest number of Covid-19 cases compared to population size anywhere in the world. Even before Omicron, officials had warned of a further 700,000 deaths.

WHO headquarters in Geneva has advised that vaccine boosters be saved for the most vulnerable, but Kluge urged people to "boost, boost, boost".

"The booster is the single most important defence against Omicron," he said.

A WHO spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Kluge's remarks.

So far, 89% of the early Omicron cases in Europe were associated with common Covid-19 symptoms such as cough, sore throat and fever, Kluge said. Most cases had been reported among adults in their 20s and 30s, spreading initially in cities at social and workplace gatherings, he added.

"The sheer volume of new Covid-19 infections could lead to more hospitalisations and widespread disruption to health systems and other critical services," he said.

"Governments and authorities need to prepare our response systems for a significant surge."

The WHO said on Monday that [Omicron is spreading faster than the Delta variant](#), causing infections in people already vaccinated or recovered from the disease. Its chief scientist has called it "unwise" to conclude from early evidence it is a milder variant than previous ones.

The news came as some countries in Europe tightened curbs, with Portugal ordering nightclubs and bars to close and telling people to work from home for at least two weeks, and Germany [reimposing tighter rules on social contact](#).

The German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, met the country's 16 state leaders on Tuesday to decide on new measures including a ban on gatherings of more than 10 vaccinated people.

Children under 14 are expected to be exempt from the rules, which will not come into effect until 28 December. Unvaccinated people are already only allowed to meet a maximum of two people from outside their own household.

In Sweden, people are being urged to work from home if possible, along with tighter rules for social distancing and a requirement for seated-only service at bars, restaurants and larger public events.

Concerns were also growing in [Spain](#), where the country's sixth coronavirus wave has sent infection rates soaring as it prepares to enter the Christmas season. The number of cases per 100,000 people hit 609 on Monday, up from 290 a fortnight ago.

Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, has urged people to remain calm but [called an emergency meeting](#) of the country's regional leaders on Wednesday afternoon to discuss the response.

	<p>Boris Johnson, meanwhile, ruled out further restrictions before Christmas. Johnson said he understood that families across England needed certainty to press ahead with Christmas plans but warned curbs could still be imposed after 25 December because of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>From Tuesday, the Covid self-isolation period in England will be cut from 10 days to seven for vaccinated people in a move that could also help save Christmas for tens of thousands of people if they get the all-clear from lateral flow tests on days 6 and 7, the government announced.</p> <p>The Christmas decision, which follows deep splits within the cabinet, was in contrast to moves by the Scottish and Welsh governments on Tuesday. Edinburgh's annual Hogmanay street party has been cancelled, while in Wales employees face £60 fines for failing to work from home as governments tightened rules to limit the spread of the Omicron variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 NHL will not send players Beijing Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/21/nhl-players-skipping-beijing-winter-olympics
GIST	<p>The National Hockey League will not send its players to compete in the men's ice hockey tournament at the Beijing Olympics due to Covid-19 concerns as the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus spreads globally, ESPN reported on Tuesday.</p> <p>The NHL agreed last September to pause its regular season so the world's top players could compete in Beijing with the caveat it could withdraw if Covid-19 disruptions forced games to be rescheduled during the Olympics window.</p> <p>That had begun looking increasingly likely in recent days with the NHL being forced to postpone 50 games in Canada and the United States after a growing number of players entered Covid-19 protocols while Omicron tore through professional sports leagues with fully vaccinated players testing positive.</p> <p>The NHL did not immediately respond to a request for comment. ESPN said a formal announcement on opting out of the Beijing Games was expected within the next 24 hours.</p> <p>The NHL had until 10 January to withdraw from the Beijing Olympics, scheduled for 4-20 February, without financial penalty.</p> <p>Players had mostly been eager to return to the largest international stage. But concerns that a positive test in China could lead to a 21-day quarantine and delay returning to their families and NHL clubs had dampened that enthusiasm for some.</p> <p>"Obviously, it's unsettling if that were to be the case when you go over there," Edmonton Oilers star Connor McDavid, who was expected to be a top player for Canada, said last week.</p> <p>NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said in early December that the decision on participating in Beijing would ultimately come down to the players, but added that the league's concerns had "only been magnified" by the Covid-19 outbreak.</p> <p>The NHL, unhappy over the prospect of interrupting a regular season to send their most valuable assets overseas where they could get hurt, ended a run of participation in five consecutive Winter Olympics when it decided not to go to Pyeongchang in 2018.</p> <p>The presence of NHL players at the Olympics made the men's ice hockey tournament one of the marquee events of the global sporting showcase.</p>

	<p>Their absence will have an impact on the Canadian and US teams the most, given their entire Olympic hockey rosters would be made up of NHL players. Other medal contenders like Sweden, Finland, Russia and the Czech Republic are somewhat less dependent on NHL talent.</p> <p>The Washington Capitals-Philadelphia Flyers game scheduled for Tuesday night became 50th NHL game delayed this season for coronavirus-related reasons.</p> <p>The league said Covid-19 issues with the Capitals prompted the postponement. Defenseman Justin Schultz and forward Daniel Sprong began the team's morning skate in Philadelphia but were pulled off after their test results came back.</p> <p>Wiping out Capitals-Flyers left the Tampa Bay Lightning at the Vegas Golden Knights as the only game left in the NHL this week. The league and players' association agreed to begin the annual holiday break early and push off the games that were scheduled for Thursday.</p> <p>"It's not fun to see all these games getting canceled," Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman said. "It'll be interesting to see the make-up dates and when they're going to fit those games in, but for us to focus on that, we can't do that."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Seconds before Calif. quake: phones rang
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/21/california-earthquake-early-warning-system
GIST	<p>In the moments before a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck the northern California coast on Monday, roughly half a million phones began to buzz. An early-alert system managed by the US Geological Survey sent warnings out before the ground started to shake, giving residents in the sparsely populated area vital time to take cover.</p> <p>The earthquake brought significant shaking but minimal damage in Humboldt county, about 210 miles north-west of San Francisco, and officials said it was an excellent test of the alert-system. It was the largest magnitude quake that's occurred since the system, known as ShakeAlert, was officially rolled out across the west coast.</p> <p>"We got some reports from folks that they got up to 10 seconds' warning before they felt shaking. That's pretty darn good," said Robert de Groot, a ShakeAlert coordinator with the USGS.</p> <p>ShakeAlert issues warnings through a series of agencies and apps including the MyShakeApp, public wireless emergency alert systems, and the Android operating system, powered by Google. A data package is created from information provided by USGS sensors and – within seconds – shows up on phones. Some apps that provide alerts are available to download but even some who didn't have an app on their phone were notified. Affected individuals are instructed to drop, cover, and hold on. Having extra seconds to do so can save lives.</p> <p>This event provided an opportunity for the scientists and system operators to test and improve ShakeAlert so it will be even better when the next big earthquake strikes. "We can run as many simulations and tests as possible but we are really going to learn the most from real earthquakes," de Groot said. "It's giving us the chance to use the system and learn how to do a better job of alerting people."</p> <p>The earthquake occurred just after noon and was centered off the coast, near a tiny town called Petrolia that's home to fewer than 1,000 people. The nearest population center, Eureka, is about 45 miles north.</p> <p>That left only about 25,000 people in the range of strong or very strong shaking, according to the US Geological Survey, though residents as far away as Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area reported feeling trembling.</p>

The Humboldt county sheriff's office of emergency services did not issue any evacuation orders, though a few roads were closed due to rockslides. The US Geological Survey estimated economic losses of less than \$10m and no fatalities.

Photos showed shattered store windows, broken bottles fallen into store aisles and tiles that had fallen loose from a commercial building's ceiling. The area last suffered an earthquake of a similar magnitude in 1993, when one person died, according to the USGS.

Jane Dexter, manager of the Petrolia General Store, told the San Francisco Chronicle the rumbling and shaking had lasted for about 20 seconds. Glass bottles fell off the shelves at the store, bursting on the floor, but no one was hurt, she said.

"It was bigger than [anything] I've felt in a long time out here," she told the Chronicle.

There have been dozens of aftershocks ranging from 2.6 to 4.5 in magnitude, according to the USGS, through Monday and Tuesday. Though the quake originated off the coast, it did not trigger a tsunami and the National Weather Service announced that there was not a threat of one.

Even as alerts improve, officials emphasized how essential it is for residents and visitors to earthquake-prone areas across the west coast to be prepared. "It is one tool in a larger toolbox," said De Groot.

Everyone should have an emergency earthquake kit, copies of important documents, and plenty of bottled water for each person in the household. "[ShakeAlert] is just an enhancement for them to use to keep safe."

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HEADLINE	12/21 Israel shuts borders, travel to fight omicron
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-bets-travel-restrictions-will-buy-it-time-to-fight-omicron-11640100113?mod=hp_lead_pos13
GIST	<p>TEL AVIV—As the Omicron variant spreads quickly across the world, Israel has leaned more heavily than other countries on shutting down its borders to international travel, wagering it would slow down a coming wave of infections and buy time to prepare.</p> <p>So far, Israel has closed its borders to foreigners and has also banned its residents from traveling to dozens of countries, including the U.S. and Canada, the U.K., much of Europe and most of Africa.</p> <p>"Our sole aim is to delay this massive local transmission," Prof. Ran Balicer, a senior adviser to the government on the pandemic, said Monday while explaining the travel restrictions to journalists in a briefing organized by the Europe Israel Press Association.</p> <p>Israeli officials say they are betting that they can close their borders to international travel while keeping their local economy open, as they wait to determine the seriousness of the Omicron variant. Bars, restaurants, malls and other entertainment venues remain open. Meanwhile, officials say they are trying to boost vaccination rates in one of the world's most inoculated countries in terms of shots per capita.</p> <p>Even with the border restrictions, the health ministry forecasts that Omicron will likely surge through the country in the next two to four weeks.</p> <p>The global response on travel has been mixed so far. U.S. health officials say vaccinated individuals should feel comfortable traveling during the holiday season as long as they wear masks. In Europe, the Netherlands on Sunday reimposed a lockdown, with all nonessential shops, bars and restaurants closed until mid-January. Denmark also placed new restrictions on public gatherings. Germany banned travelers to the U.K. on Monday because of growing concerns over the rapidly rising number of Omicron infections there.</p>

The criteria Israel's health ministry uses to put countries on the no-fly list is based on the percentage of travelers to Israel from a certain country that tests positive for the variant, or on how widespread the variant is in the country or its immediate neighbors.

Many governments around the world are waiting to learn how severely ill people infected with Omicron are likely to be before applying new restrictions. While it is known that Omicron is highly contagious, experts are still waiting for more data to understand whether it causes a milder illness than previous strains.

Israel, however, reckons the foreign travel restrictions will buy it more time to learn about the severity of illness caused by the variant, according to Prof. Balicer. Israel will be in a better position to "select judiciously the types of restrictions we impose within Israel on the economy," he said.

Israeli officials say they know from earlier attempts to use travel restrictions during the pandemic that they can't keep the new variants out for long. But they do think they are getting better at identifying the cases that do get through and are using contact tracing to break the chain of infection. The fewer cases there are, the more effective the contact tracing is.

Israel's Health Ministry on Tuesday said there are 1,148 confirmed or highly suspected cases of people with Omicron, the majority of whom had either recently returned from abroad or who came into contact with returnees.

This is evidence, Israeli officials say, that their travel restrictions have bought the country time. In other countries around the world, like the U.S., Omicron has [already become the dominant variant](#).

But the strict travel restrictions have also drawn criticism in Israel, including from former health officials who helped lead the pandemic response, for being too severe a burden on the citizenry with little practical advantages.

"This thing is simply not effective," said Prof. Itamar Grotto, former Deputy Director-General of the Ministry of Health, in an interview Tuesday on Army Radio.

Mr. Grotto, who petitioned Israel's highest court against the travel restrictions, argued the idea of buying time to raise vaccination rates was impractical, given that it takes several weeks or more for the unvaccinated to complete the two-shot regimen. He also noted that not only have the unvaccinated not flocked to medical clinics in recent weeks, but that buying time before the next wave means those already inoculated would be impacted by waning protection.

Israel had one of the world's quickest and widest vaccination campaigns at the start of the pandemic. Consequently, it also became the first country to carry out a wide-scale booster campaign, as its population suffered from waning protection first and was hit hard by the Delta variant.

But the success of those campaigns has been overshadowed by slow vaccine uptake in the country's younger age brackets, especially children and teenagers.

Just under 60% of Israel's 9.3 million citizens are considered fully protected from severe illness, meaning they have had three shots, or less than six months have passed since the second shot or their recovery from the virus.

That number has barely budged since Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett declared his country was in a state of emergency when Omicron was first discovered and he implored citizens to get vaccinated given the high stakes for the country.

While some countries have already been forced to put strict restrictions and even closures on their local economies, Israel is still largely unrestricted.

	<p>Local businesses are supposed to enforce indoor masking and entertainment, and sports venues are supposed to check for proof of vaccination or recovery before allowing entry. But public compliance, as well as government enforcement of these regulations, dwindled in the weeks before Omicron was discovered, and haven't noticeably picked up since.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Israel's government approved limiting workforce capacity in government and public sector workplaces to 50% starting next Sunday. Israeli officials are meeting again late Tuesday to continue discussions over more restrictions. On Tuesday, Israel's government approved limiting workforce capacity in government and public-sector workplaces to 50% starting next Sunday. Israeli officials are meeting again late Tuesday to continue discussions over more restrictions.</p> <p>"To explain this new situation to our people and make them realize we are in a new emergency situation, I think this is the biggest challenge we have in the next few weeks," said Prof. Salman Zarka, Israel's top civilian government adviser on coronavirus, during Monday's briefing with journalists.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Most UW classes return to remote learning
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3289379/most-uw-classes-return-remote-learning/
GIST	<p>For the first week of winter quarter at the University of Washington, which starts Jan. 3, most classes will return to a remote learning format.</p> <p>The university announced this change Tuesday in a letter to UW students, staff, faculty, and other academic personnel. The move to remote learning is made, the letter says, as the UW community tracks the spread of the omicron variant, being mindful of the "short time between holiday gatherings and travel and the start of UW's winter quarter on Jan. 3."</p> <p>While most classes resume remotely for the first week of the quarter, clinical instruction and practicums will still meet in person. Some lab courses may also have an in-person option for that first week. Facilities at all three campuses will remain operational, including housing, libraries, advising and student services. Buildings will largely remain open as well.</p> <p>"We are committed to a return to in-person education and look forward to that happening on Monday, Jan. 10," the letter states.</p> <p>The university required students on campus to be vaccinated against COVID-19 before autumn quarter. The UW's letter recommends that students get boosted prior to in-person classes, and suggests that those who travel or gather over the break get tested upon their return and monitor their symptoms.</p> <p>"We recognize the news in recent days — and even this announcement — may spark both concern and a sense of déjà vu. The rapid spread of Omicron does remind us of the spread of the original coronavirus and comes at a time when we are all feeling the losses and the physical, mental and emotional effects of a nearly two-year pandemic," the letter reads.</p> <p>"But much has changed since early 2020. We know more, are better prepared and are a community that is using all the tools available to us to mitigate the risk of infection and illness, starting with extremely high vaccination rates. FDA-authorized vaccines provide protection against severe illness and this protection can be enhanced through booster shots, which are strongly recommended."</p> <p>Read the full letter from the UW online here, signed by President Ana Mari Cauce and Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs Mark Richards.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Tacoma PD chief clears 2 in Ellis' death
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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/tacoma-police-chief-exonerates-two-of-the-officers-involved-in-the-death-of-manuel-ellis-saying-they-acted-appropriately/
GIST	<p>The Tacoma police chief's decision Tuesday to exonerate of any wrongdoing two of the officers involved in the March 2020 death of Manuel Ellis has left Ellis' family angry and "heartbroken but not surprised," according to one of their attorneys.</p> <p>Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards acknowledged Tuesday that some would be upset with the decision to clear the officers and allow them to return to the streets, and urged calm.</p> <p>Some of the sharpest criticism came from Ellis' family and their attorneys, who expressed outrage that Officers Masyih Ford and Armando Farinas would face no punishment in the killing of the 33-year-old Black man while he was in police custody. Three other Tacoma officers have been criminally charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter for the killing of Ellis, who cried "I can't breathe!" before he died of oxygen deprivation while being restrained.</p> <p>"No one should be so naive to think that the Tacoma Police Department is motivated to police its own conduct and conduct a genuine investigation of what happened on March 3, 2020," said attorney Matthew Ericksen, who described Ellis' family as heartbroken but hardly surprised by the decision.</p> <p>"This is our Christmas present. Merry Christmas to the Ellis family ... we get to see officers go back to work after killing somebody," said Ellis' older brother, Matthew Ellis.</p> <p>Ford and Farinas had been under internal investigation by the department for possible policy violations in connection with the March 3, 2020, death of Ellis. Interim Tacoma police Chief Mike Ake presented the findings of that investigation to Woodards and the City Council on Tuesday morning. The council met in closed session for nearly an hour before the announcement.</p> <p>Ake said Ford, 29, and Farinas, 27, have been on administrative leave for more than a year and will have to undergo extensive training before they are returned to active service. The report detailing the investigation into the two officers was posted Tuesday on the city of Tacoma's website.</p> <p>Ake said Farinas was the officer who placed a spit hood over Ellis' head during the arrest. He said the officer's actions were "reasonable and appropriate under the circumstances."</p> <p>"At the time of the application, officers on scene, including Officer Farinas, were concerned about a possible biohazard exposure due to Mr. Ellis spitting near officers," the chief told the council. "Officer Farinas was familiar with how a spit hood worked and volunteered to retrieve one and apply it. Once the spit hood was applied, Officer Farinas had no other contact with Mr. Ellis."</p> <p>Ford, he said, helped hold Ellis' legs down during the arrest and spent time talking to Ellis, "trying to calm him down and let him know medical aid was on the way."</p> <p>"When Mr. Ellis commented that he could not breathe, Officer Ford assisted in rolling him onto his side in a recovery position," the chief said. "He also was the first officer to alert arriving medical personnel that Mr. Ellis' condition was deteriorating."</p> <p>Ellis, a lifelong Tacoma resident, died on the street while being treated by the medics, according to reports.</p> <p>Two Tacoma officers, Matthew Collins, 38, and Christopher "Shane" Burbank, 35, face second-degree murder and first-degree manslaughter charges, and officer Timothy "Timmy" Rankine, 32, is charged with first-degree manslaughter in connection with Ellis' death.</p> <p>Ellis had been staying at a sober-living home in south Tacoma called God's Hand Up and on the night he died, he was returning home from a 7-Eleven with a bag of doughnuts. According to charging documents, Officers Collins and Burbank said they saw him in the middle of an intersection, hassling</p>

occupants of a passing car. A brief confrontation became violent, with Burbank knocking Ellis to the ground with his car door, the documents say.

Charges allege that Collins used a “lateral vascular neck restraint” from behind while Burbank repeatedly used a Taser on Ellis.

At least a half-dozen eyewitnesses, two of whom filmed the incident with their cellphone cameras, told investigators that the officers launched an unprovoked attack on Ellis, the records show. The witnesses [contradicted](#) the statements of Collins and Burbank.

The internal investigation exonerated Farinas of allegations of “unsatisfactory performance” of his duties and Ford for allegations of excessive use of force, Ake said.

Ellis’ family and their attorneys expressed outrage over the decision during a Tuesday afternoon news conference via Zoom.

James Bible, an attorney for the family, said the city is ignoring the fact that Ellis was in a completely vulnerable position when he was being restrained. Ake’s decision to exonerate the two officers is telling the public that there will be no accountability for officers who murder as well those who stand by and allow it to happen.

“All of Tacoma should be ashamed,” Bible said.

The city did not find that Farinas violated policy because the police department has none when it comes to the use of spit masks, which are dangerous and deadly devices if not used properly, said Stephen Dermer, an Ellis family attorney. The department doesn’t train officers on how to use the masks, he added.

During the news conference, the Ellis family’s attorneys displayed a photo of a warning label on a spit mask, also known as transport hood, that indicates the devices could cause injury or lead to death from asphyxiation, suffocation or drowning in one’s own fluids.

“What the city of Tacoma really told you all is that they advocate for and allow their officers to be able to do whatever they want to bodies of Black people when they’re walking home from 7-Elevens,” Bible said.

Leslie Cushman, a civil rights attorney and the citizen sponsor of Initiative 940, which changed the laws around when police can use deadly force and requires officers to be trained in de-escalation techniques, called the decision “beyond disappointing.”

“This sets the bar as low as you can go,” she said in a tweet shortly after Ake’s decision was announced. “And what did they do following the brutality? Did they report the cover-up? There are no clean hands among the officers present that night.”

Ellis’s death sparked widespread protests and led to the [first criminal charges in decades against police officers for using excessive force during an arrest](#).

Ford and Farinas are named as defendants in a federal [wrongful death and civil rights](#) lawsuit filed in September by Ellis’ family.

The lawsuit brought by Ellis’ sister Monet Carter-Mixon and their mother, Marcia Carter, in U.S. District Court in Tacoma also names the three officers charged in connection with Ellis’ death as well as the Tacoma Police Department and the Pierce County Sheriff’s Department as defendants.

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SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/21/winter-warm-us-climate/
GIST	<p>Forsythias are one of the first flowering plants to bloom in the spring — often signaling the change of season.</p> <p>But this year, some forsythias are blooming in December.</p> <p>The premature bloom is indicative of an abnormally warm kickoff to a season that is heating up faster than any other. Winter officially began Tuesday, but in many places, that is hard to recognize.</p> <p>Lawrence Connolly, a resident of Boston for 61 years, first spotted flowering forsythia in his backyard in West Roxbury last week, after the temperature had surpassed 60 degrees for two days in a row.</p> <p>“I’ve never noted Forsythia blooming in December before, I did think it unusual,” he wrote in a message. Others in New England also have observed the blooming flower.</p> <p>Nicknamed the Easter tree, the woody shrubs first produce bright yellow bell-shaped flowers before their leaves emerge. They retain their leaves until late fall and go dormant in winter until milder weather returns in March or April.</p> <p>“Those are plants that should be putting on their flowers in the spring, after winter, not before,” said Theresa Crimmins, the director of the USA National Phenology Network and a research professor at the University of Arizona.</p> <p>December temperatures are traditionally near or below freezing in the northern and central United States, but much of the country has been hit with repeated warm spells — temperatures up to 30 to 40 degrees above normal.</p> <p>Forecasts show temperatures reaching the 70s in the Midwest on Christmas Eve and the 60s in the Mid-South and Mid-Atlantic on Christmas Day.</p> <p>This unusual winter warmth isn’t a one-off, though.</p> <p>A recent analysis by Climate Central shows that winter in the United States is warming faster than any other season. Since 1970, average winter temperatures have increased one degree or more in every state, while 70 percent have seen increases of at least three degrees.</p> <p>States experiencing the fastest winter warming are in the Northeast and the Great Lakes region.</p> <p>Other studies have shown the length of winter season shrinking globally as well. From 1952 to 2011, winter shrank by at least 2.1 days per decade on average. By 2100, winter could be less than two months and could start a half-month later.</p> <p>“What it really boils down to is those kinds of consequences hit us either economically or from a recreation or lifestyle perspective,” Crimmins said. “When crops are more vulnerable, we can’t get plants and food crops that we expect to get anymore.”</p> <p>Crimmins mentioned the occurrence of false springs, or when temperatures increase much earlier than expected for an extended period, typically in late winter or early spring. Certain plants respond to the increase in temperature and sometimes bloom, but only to be hit with a detrimental frost that can wipe out the plant for the season.</p> <p>“If those flower buds get hit by frost, they don’t regenerate that spring, and they don’t regenerate for the whole year,” Crimmins said. “There’s been in recent years some really devastating impacts where we’ve had early warmth, followed by frosts and then total loss of crops.”</p>

	<p>Changes in the blooms of fruits and plants can affect other links in the food chain. For instance, many migratory birds travel north according to the movement of the sun. If plants bloom earlier or insects move because higher temperatures occur earlier, the birds may arrive when most of their food is no longer abundant.</p> <p>Crimmins said the higher temperatures can affect hibernation behavior in mammals as well as insects that overwintered as eggs or larvae in the soil. It also affects frogs and turtles that have buried themselves in mud.</p> <p>Warmer winters also don't suppress disease-carrying insects as effectively as colder winters. Mosquitoes and ticks can move to new regions that were too cold to live previously, spreading diseases more widely.</p> <p>"The biological parts of the [Earth] system don't look at the calendar," Crimmins said. "They are responding to what's happening in temperature and the moisture availability for the most part."</p> <p>Despite the warming winter trend, some places still will experience extreme or record cold. In February, polar air spilled south to produce a fatal freeze in Texas. Additionally, the Dakotas and Montana have experienced some recent winters colder than were observed in the 1970s.</p> <p>Across the eastern United States, Climate Central found that cold weather still will occur in the coming decades, although cold snaps have become shorter and less frequent recently.</p> <p>"Though we're seeing warmth now, and though we're seeing some anomalous plant responses, it's too early to know if it's going to be a totally off-the-rails spring — with no winter at all," Crimmins said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Schools ready for next big surge?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/us/covid-schools.html
GIST	<p>The dread was familiar.</p> <p>As news spread of the latest coronavirus surge, fueled by the Omicron variant, parents faced a return to the drudgery of school through a screen, child care crises and restless young bodies, penned inside for the winter.</p> <p>In Manhattan, Olivia Strong received an email from her son's public middle school on Monday, informing her that his cohort of eighth graders would transition to remote learning because of multiple positive virus cases.</p> <p>"I was not even slightly surprised; I fully expected it," she said, sighing deeply. Her hope, she added, was that a short break to reset would allow schools to reopen more safely in the new year.</p> <p>Districts have mostly reassured families that despite targeted classroom closures to contain spread of the virus, they plan to continue in-person learning until the Christmas break and reopen as planned in January. New York City, Boston and Montgomery County, Md., in suburban Washington, were among the large school systems that said they would not shift districtwide to remote learning, or would do so only if forced to by public health officials.</p> <p>Still, the alarming spread of the virus could expose the rickety infrastructure that has kept schools running through most of this year. Many schools are still in need of substitute teachers and bus drivers, and can ill afford an outbreak that would send even more staff members home. There still are not enough rapid tests to quickly screen whole classrooms or schools. And some districts may have a tough time meeting demand for online learning as children are quarantined or concerned parents choose to keep them home.</p> <p>School officials must simultaneously address the devastating impact of the pandemic on students: academic deficits, mental health struggles and labor shortages.</p>

“This is going to be a winter of challenging choices for schools, but closure cannot be the default,” said Robin Lake, director of the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#), a think tank that has studied district responses to Covid-19.

Despite targeted classroom closures to contain spread of the virus, things have gone relatively smoothly for schools. Across the nation’s 13,000 districts and 98,000 public schools this week, there are about 600 shuttered schools or districts, according to [data from Burbio](#), a company that has tracked how schools have operated through the pandemic. There are fewer closures now than in November.

And school outbreaks remain limited, as they have been throughout the pandemic.

New York City, the nation’s largest district and the one currently most threatened by the Omicron variant, has 1,600 schools; [seven are currently closed](#) because of virus cases, with 45 under investigation.

On Tuesday, the test positivity rate in the city’s schools was 1.76 percent out of more than 10,000 tests, according to a district spokesman. The citywide community positivity rate has been 4 percent over the past two weeks. Even though [the policy](#) is to test only unvaccinated students who have parental consent, the data suggests schools are relatively safe environments.

The picture nationally had been bright enough that many schools relaxed virus restrictions in recent weeks.

Several school districts in Florida [dropped their mask mandates](#). New Jersey [relaxed school quarantine rules](#), decoupling them from community transmission rates and reducing the number of stay-at-home days for students who had close contact with an infected person.

And in Missouri, the attorney general, a Republican, [sent a letter](#) to districts directing them to drop mask mandates and quarantine requirements after a circuit court judge ruled that such measures violated the State Constitution.

Several districts are resisting, a sign perhaps that there may be political dissension after the holidays, when schools weigh whether to reopen classrooms after family gatherings that will almost certainly make the current surge more severe.

Washington, D.C., has already extended its vacation by two days, [directing families](#) to pick up rapid tests at schools and test students before returning them to the classroom.

Prince George’s County, in suburban Maryland, announced a [shift to remote learning](#) until mid-January after [three of the district’s 208 schools](#) shut down last week because of virus spread.

But Prince George’s is an outlier; the political will to keep schools open is notable given that many of the states experiencing the heaviest virus case loads are in the Northeast and Midwest, which have powerful teachers’ unions.

They spent much of the pandemic fighting for strict mitigation measures and longer periods of remote learning.

This time, union leaders in New York, Boston and Philadelphia said they were not asking for districtwide remote learning, and were instead focused on pushing administrators to enforce virus mitigation measures.

But in an interview on Friday, the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, Stacy Davis Gates, did not rule out pushing for a period of remote learning after the holidays.

She argued that the district’s contact tracing efforts had been sluggish and that the city should make greater efforts to vaccinate students and parents on school grounds and provide families with free, at-home rapid tests.

Several schools, she said, already had to contend with large numbers of absent staff members because of the virus. “At what number do you say it’s unsafe for people to be in the building without X number of adults?” she asked.

Chicago Public Schools said in a written statement that after the holiday break, which began on Friday, it would restart a free, weekly P.C.R. testing program at schools and would “push to urge families to consent to testing.”

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [encouraged schools](#) on Friday to reduce quarantines and closures by using a protocol known as test-to-stay, in which close contacts are given frequent rapid tests; only those who test positive must stay home.

Many districts do not have a sufficient supply of such tests, however, nor the staffing to widely administer them. Chicago has piloted test-to-stay in a single elementary school. Boston Public Schools said last week it had hired an outside staffing agency to help fill open nursing positions.

Another challenge is that many parents have not given consent for their children to be tested for the virus at school. Some teachers’ unions have urged districts to shift from a protocol of parental opt-in to one of parental opt-out.

“If there is a positive case in a class, everyone should just get tested,” Erik Berg, vice president of the Boston Teachers Union, said. “If our universities and colleges can test everyone on campus twice per week, it says a lot about the commitment to K-12 education that we can’t even test people we know were in the same room with a positive case for six or seven hours.”

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HEADLINE	12/20 Experts: microchip crisis isn’t going away
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/bidens-plan-ease-supply-chain-pileup-will-take-yea/
GIST	<p>Thousands of new cars are piling up at manufacturers’ lots, the price of electric toothbrushes has surged, coffee machines have disappeared from store shelves, and Apple has drastically cut its iPhone production.</p> <p>The global computer chip shortage is showing no signs of abating heading into 2022, and the Biden administration’s proposed solution remains years away.</p> <p>President Biden and his Cabinet have urged Congress to pass legislation that would invest \$52 billion to increase U.S. semiconductor chip production.</p> <p>Supply interruptions have depleted consumer product inventory, and officials say domestic chip production is critical.</p> <p>The bill, known as the CHIPS for America Act, passed the Senate in July with bipartisan support but stalled in the House.</p> <p>At a speech last month in Detroit, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo implored Congress to pass the bill so the U.S. can “immediately” begin ramping up chip production.</p> <p>Even if Congress does act urgently, the legislation is no quick fix, analysts say. By the time U.S. semiconductor chip manufacturing can get up to speed, the crisis will have long passed.</p> <p>“The chip shortage is going to get resolved in the second half of 2022. It takes three years for a new chip [factory] to come to production,” said Gaurav Gupta, vice president of semiconductors and electronics for Gartner, a technology research and consulting company.</p>

Even if the U.S. increases production significantly, he said, it can't completely remove itself from the global supply chain. The testing and packaging are completed in Southeast Asia, where costs are much lower.

It costs 30% more to make a chip in the U.S. than in Asia, according to a 2020 report by the Semiconductor Industry Association. That could add \$10 billion to \$40 billion to production expenses.

"You'll still send the chips back to Southeast Asia unless you are bringing the complete ecosystem here, and you won't because it's impractical to do that," Mr. Gupta said.

It is not clear whether the federal dollars allocated under the CHIPS Act would be enough to support domestic production. The U.S. share of the global semiconductor manufacturing market dropped from 37% in 1990 to 12% in 2020, according to the industry association. Europe's share dropped from 44% to 9% in the same time frame. Asia now holds 75% of the world's semiconductor manufacturing capacity.

"There's no special sauce down there except money," said Paul Gratz, who teaches computer engineering at Texas A&M University.

In China, where it costs nearly 50% less to produce a semiconductor than it does in the U.S., the government is spending \$150 billion to increase chip production. That is nearly triple the investment under the CHIPS Act.

Some fear the U.S. bid to increase domestic manufacturing will lead to a glut of chips in the market, resulting in falling prices and negative or zero revenue growth.

The revenue of the top 10 semiconductor firms, including Intel and Samsung, declined by 12% in 2019 because of oversupply, according to Gartner's research.

The potential for overcapacity is on the horizon as automobile and smartphone makers slash inventory because of sluggish sales.

"You have to solve this problem in a systematic manner," Mr. Gupta said. "You don't have to go with political sentiment."

U.S.-based Intel Corp. announced Thursday that it will spend \$7.1 billion to build a massive packaging and testing facility in Malaysia, bucking the administration's call for more domestic manufacturing.

The \$7.1 billion is part of Intel's overall \$30 billion investment in Malaysia, which will include a sprawling complex to build chips for cars, computers and other industries.

Mr. Gratz said the U.S. needs to stop relying on Asian countries for semiconductor chips.

South Korea and Taiwan are the world's two chipmaking powerhouses, combining for roughly 43% of the global market, according to the Semiconductor Industry Association. Both nations, however, are under global threats that could lead to instability. South Korea has repeated conflict with North Korea, and fears of a full Chinese invasion of Taiwan persist.

"In the long term, [the CHIPS Act] is probably beneficial for us because two countries that have the lion's shares of the market are Taiwan and South Korea," Mr. Gratz said. "By investing domestically, it is going to give us more of a cushion if there is a geopolitical shake-up."

Instead of ramping up domestic production, Mr. Gratz said, companies should invest in technologies to use alternate chips.

That strategy would pay off for the auto industry, which has been devastated by the chip shortage.

	<p>Automaker Tesla has survived by developing its own semiconductors and changing its software to use fewer chips.</p> <p>The chip shortage is expected to cost the global automotive industry \$210 billion in revenue this year, but Tesla has shown a string of profitable quarters and a growing business.</p> <p>“What Tesla did was very impressive,” Mr. Gratz said. “They were very flexible with respect to retooling and spent a lot more on software so they can use different processors into their cars.”</p> <p>Tesla’s technology investment enabled it to increase production while other automakers slowed or shut down production because of the chip shortage.</p> <p>Toyota cut production targets in the U.S. and overseas by 15% last month. Ford announced this summer that it has 70,000 partially built cars awaiting semiconductor chips. Ford did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the number of vehicles that have been completed.</p> <p>Other manufacturers are looking into technological investments. General Motors said it will work with chip manufacturers to develop devices that combine several functions previously controlled by chips.</p> <p>Ford and other automakers are seeking partnerships with semiconductor companies to give them more control over the supply and design of chips.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Military software tool: monitor China anger
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/pacific-military-command-adopts-software-tool-moni/
GIST	<p>The Pentagon’s Indo-Pacific Command recently unveiled a software application that military officials say will monitor Chinese military anger at U.S. activities in the region in a bid to reduce tensions.</p> <p>Some analysts warn that the application represents a step back toward U.S. policies to appease China, whose communist leaders have used fears of upsetting Beijing to manipulate U.S. decision-makers.</p> <p>The software tool is designed to systematically gauge Chinese military reactions to U.S. actions in the region, such as arms sales to Taiwan, naval and aerial maneuvers in disputed maritime zones, and congressional visits, defense officials and spokesmen said. The software measures U.S.-Chinese “strategic friction,” said a defense official who spoke to Reuters aboard a flight with Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks last week.</p> <p>The computer-based software evaluates information from early 2020 on significant activities that could trigger tensions in U.S.-Chinese relations. Military leaders and Pentagon policymakers will use it to predict how Beijing will respond to U.S. actions. The software is part of the Biden administration’s policy of seeking to curb Chinese aggression while preventing at all costs an open conflict between the world’s two most powerful countries and two biggest economies.</p> <p>“With the spectrum of conflict and the challenge sets spanning down into the gray zone, what you see is the need to be looking at a far broader set of indicators, weaving that together and then understanding the threat interaction,” Ms. Hicks told Reuters in discussing the software.</p> <p>United Mine Workers breaks with Joe Manchin over opposition to \$1.75 trillion social welfare bill An Indo-Pacific Command official said the tool will be used to avoid inadvertently provoking a conflict with China.</p> <p>“U.S. Indo-Pacific Command ensures security and stability throughout the Indo-Pacific,” the official told The Washington Times. The command’s combined military force “responsibly manages competition to prevent conflict in the region. One of the best methods to do just that is centered on looking at the complex and overlapping geopolitical, operational and strategic environment,” the official added.</p>

The command “will continue to refine methods, including decision aids, to responsibly manage competition with our No. 1 pacing challenge while supporting national defense priorities.”

A Chinese Embassy spokesman did not respond to an email request for comment.

A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment. “This is an Indo-Pacom program,” he said.

An ‘appeasement app’

Critics among U.S. China-watching experts expressed concern that the software will allow Beijing to manipulate U.S. policies and weaken U.S. responses to threats posed by China, with the U.S. bending over backward not to give offense to China or spark a crisis.

Kerry K. Gershaneck, a retired Marine and former Pentagon policymaker with extensive intelligence experience, said the “appeasement app” will hand China’s leaders a political warfare victory.

“China’s political warfare aims, in part, to condition naive opponents to do what the Chinese Communist Party wants them to do, on their own volition, without Beijing actually telling them to do it,” Mr. Gershaneck said. “With this ‘appeasement app,’ it appears the CCP has masterfully succeeded in its conditioning of senior U.S. defense officials.”

Such an approach will only invite further Chinese aggression and demoralize military personnel, he said.

“The app appears to be self-destructively unilateral: It tells the U.S. military — and only the U.S. military — to always back off, to stand down and to do nothing that might possibly ‘upset’ China,” Mr. Gershaneck said.

Retired Navy Capt. Jim Fanell, a former head of intelligence for the Pacific Fleet, said the software tool is designed to guide military commanders and diplomats and will systematically erode U.S. defense of its national interests in the region — a key goal of Beijing.

“This tool should be scrapped immediately, and American commanders and diplomats should be allowed to operate as the environment dictates, allowing for maximum flexibility and assertiveness that will keep the Chinese Communist Party decision-makers on their back feet when it comes to pursuing their strategic goal of pushing America out of the Indo-Pacific,” he said.

Miles Yu, a State Department official in charge of China policy during the Trump administration, has described the U.S. approach to China as misguided “anger management” based on false fears of Chinese reactions and bluffs rather than proactive U.S. initiatives.

“For decades, our China policy was carried out based upon an ‘anger management’ mode — that is, we formulated our China policy by calculating how mad the CCP might be at us, not what suits the best American national interest,” Mr. Yu said in a recent interview.

Proactive and reactive

The tool was unveiled during a briefing for Ms. Hicks at Indo-Pacific Command’s Honolulu headquarters. Included in the briefing were the theater’s senior commander, Adm. John C. Aquilino; Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Samuel Paparo; Gen. Charles Flynn, commander of the Army Pacific; and other senior leaders for frontline military forces in charge of dealing with China.

Over the past five years, American military forces in the Pacific have stepped up proactive actions designed to push back against Chinese military encroachment. The activities began during the Trump administration.

Chinese military forces, in turn, have sharply increased aggressive and threatening operations, mainly against Taiwan and against rival claimants to sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Toward Taiwan, China has stepped up military flights and naval maneuvers close to the self-ruled island. U.S. officials have described the actions as coercive and threatening.

China has carried out war games, including long-range missile tests, in disputed islands throughout the strategic South China Sea.

Chinese naval vessels have sought to drive U.S. warships out of the sea when the Navy conducts “freedom of navigation operations” through disputed waterways.

Last month, the State Department warned China that it faced a military response after Chinese coast guard vessels blocked Philippine efforts to resupply a military post in the Spratly Islands.

Mr. Yu has argued that failed policies have been based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how China’s rulers try to manipulate the U.S. First, the Chinese voice anger and rage at U.S. actions and then see how the United States reacts. The process allows the Chinese to calibrate American policy responses to suit their interests.

“Unfortunately, too often, we fell for this CCP sophistry and made our China policies to appease CCP sensitivities and fake outrage to avoid an often imagined and exaggerated direct confrontation with the seemingly enraged CCP,” he said.

More broadly, Mr. Gershaneck said, the adoption of the app sends a terrible message to frontline U.S. military personnel that they should always back down and never risk angering China. The military should instead invest in software that will assist military officers and diplomats on how to exploit Chinese weaknesses and engage in successful political warfare against Beijing, he added.

Disclosure of the software followed reports that Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, so feared Chinese military misperceptions of a U.S. attack that he telephoned a Chinese general to tell him that the United States would inform him of any military attacks in the fraught days after the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

A spokesman for Gen. Milley did not respond to a request for comment on the app.

Gordon Chang, a Chinese affairs expert, said the “appeasement app” is a political gift for the Chinese military.

“We should send Chinese flag officers an app that sends them alerts whenever they are about to do something that will get us angry,” Mr. Chang said.

Capt. Fanell, the former Pacific Fleet intelligence director, said the focus on “strategic friction” software reflects an institutionalization at Indo-Pacific Command of a central tenet of pro-China policies first put into place by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and adopted more recently by the Obama administration. That policy calls for avoiding all military and other activities that could provoke China or lead to the perception by Beijing of “containment.” The overall objective was to preserve positive ties.

“During my time in uniform, we saw the American government, both State and Defense departments, impose self-induced constraints on the exercise of American military and diplomatic operations in order to not provoke the PRC,” said Capt. Fanell, who retired in 2015.

U.S. reconnaissance flights near China’s coasts and requests of regional allies to push back against Chinese hegemony were called off or reduced based on fears that they would place the greater U.S.-Chinese relationship at risk.

	“These same appeasers proclaimed that the ‘relationship’ with China was the most important relationship for America’s national security and thus we had to constrain our actions,” Capt. Fanell said. He added that the officials “were actively promoting a policy of kowtowing to the Chinese Communist Party and its bad behavior.”
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HEADLINE	12/21 Putin: West to blame for crisis in Europe
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/vladimir-putin-says-west-blame-crisis-europe-keeps/
GIST	<p>Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday the U.S. and its allies, not the Kremlin, are to blame for rising tensions in Europe that have revived talk of war.</p> <p>The Russian leader’s remarks to a gathering of top defense officials in Moscow were just the latest rhetorical escalation amid clashes with Washington and its NATO allies over Ukraine and other hot spots along Russia’s western border, even as both sides hinted a diplomatic resolution is still within reach.</p> <p>NATO leaders say Russia’s build-up of troops along the restive Ukrainian border and its demands for security “guarantees” against future NATO expansion has led to the sharpest deterioration in relations since the end of the Cold War.</p> <p>Mr. Putin clearly doesn’t see it that way.</p> <p>“What is happening now, tensions that are building up in Europe, are [the U.S. and NATO’s] fault every step of the way,” Mr. Putin said. “Russia has been forced to respond at every step.”</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony Blinken, addressing reporters in Washington later in the day, reiterated that Russia should expect “massive consequences” from a united NATO if it carries out new acts of aggression in Ukraine.</p> <p>The exchange underscored the sharply differing perspectives the two sides are bringing to the crisis.</p> <p>In the Russian president’s analysis, NATO has been engaged in a provocative policy disregarding Russia’s interests virtually since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, expanding eastward and accepting new members along Russia’s border from the Baltics to the Black Sea.</p> <p>The U.S. and its allies also have refused Mr. Putin’s demand to rule out future NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia and have helped both militarily in the face of intimidation by Moscow. But Russian officials say they have been forced to draw a line in the sand in the face of repeated provocations in Russia’s strategic backyard.</p> <p>“What they are now trying to do and plan to do in Ukraine’s territory, it’s not thousands of kilometers away, it’s happening right at the doorstep of our house,” Mr. Putin said Tuesday.</p> <p>Ukrainian officials are warning that the Kremlin is trying to lay the groundwork to justify a military invasion, with a major troop buildup on the border and strong words of support for a pro-Russia Ukrainian separatist movement battling the government in Kyiv.</p> <p>The Associated Press reported Tuesday that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu charged that more than 120 employees of unnamed private U.S. military companies are training troops and providing tactical advice in eastern Ukraine to forces fighting the separatists.</p> <p>Russia last week presented broad demands for security guarantees in Europe that NATO and Biden administration officials were quick to reject. But both sides still say they hope direct talks can avert the threat of a shooting war.</p>

Despite the tough talk on both sides, there were signs more serious diplomacy is underway behind the scenes. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that he intends to call a new meeting of the NATO-Russia Council as soon as possible in early January.

And Mr. Putin himself after his address talked by phone with French President Emmanuel Macron and new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz about the proposals he has presented for a new security arrangement in Europe.

Mr. Putin also told the Russian defense gathering, “Armed conflicts, bloodshed is not our choice, and we don’t want such developments. We want to resolve issues by political and diplomatic means.”

Mr. Blinken suggested there could be serious contacts between the two sides “early in the new year” to climb down from the current impasse.

“There are some very obvious nonstarters in things that the Russians have put on the table,” he said. “There may be other issues that are appropriate for discussion and conversation, just as there are things that we would put on the table that Russia needs to respond to.”

The U.S. diplomat insisted Washington and its European allies were united in resisting Russian aggression, but there was at least one discordant note: Bulgarian Defense Minister Stefan Yanev said his country would not accept a NATO troop deployment on its territory as a possible response to Russia’s latest moves.

“Such a decision would not match the allies’ interests or the national interests of Bulgaria,” Mr. Yanev wrote in a Facebook post.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Germany clamps down to slow omicron
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/germany-clamps-down-on-new-years-parties-to-tame-o/
GIST	<p>BERLIN (AP) — Germany announced new restrictions Tuesday that will begin after Christmas to slow the spread of the new omicron variant, rules that will fall short of a full lockdown but will include contact restrictions even for vaccinated people.</p> <p>“I can understand anyone who doesn’t want to hear about the coronavirus, mutations and new virus variants,” Chancellor Olaf Scholz said at a press conference Tuesday evening. “But we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to this next wave.”</p> <p>Among the new rules are limiting private gatherings to 10 people, closing nightclubs nationwide and having large events like soccer matches held without an in-person audience. The restrictions will go into effect nationwide on Dec. 28, although states can implement the measures sooner.</p> <p>Scholz said the government decided to wait until after Christmas to implement new national restrictions because family-focused holidays such as Christmas and Easter “have not proven to be major drivers of the pandemic.” But he said restrictions on New Year’s celebrations are necessary to keep Germany’s health system from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases.</p> <p>“This is no longer the time for parties and social evenings in big groups,” Scholz said.</p> <p>Scholz and Germany’s 16 state governors agreed on the new restrictions at a meeting Tuesday, after the government’s new panel of experts called for action to be taken within days nationwide because the omicron variant is racing across Europe.</p> <p>Scholz and the state governors will meet again on Jan. 7 to discuss whether the measures should be continued or even tightened.</p>

Hours before the meeting, the national disease control center called on Twitter for “maximum contact restrictions” starting immediately and lasting until mid-January, and for Germans to reduce their holiday travel “to the absolutely necessary.”

One state, Hamburg, already moved Tuesday to impose restrictions starting on Christmas Eve. There will be a 10-person limit on private meetings and dance events will be banned, effectively closing nightclubs. Restaurants and bars in the state will have to close at 11 p.m. - except on New Year’s Eve, when they can stay open until 1 a.m.

Restrictions already in place in Germany target mainly the unvaccinated, with proof of vaccination or recovery required to enter nonessential stores. Also, the sale of New Year fireworks has been banned nationwide.

Scholz said the German government is also trying to speed up its booster vaccine campaign, aiming to give out an additional 30 million shots by the end of January by keeping some vaccination centers open over the holidays.

“Vaccinate, vaccinate, vaccinate remains our goal,” Scholz said. “The coronavirus doesn’t take a Christmas break.”

But authorities remain dissatisfied that only 70.4% of Germany’s population has been fully vaccinated and 32.6% have received boosters.

Germany’s infection rate is, for now, drifting downward slowly. On Tuesday, the disease control center recorded 306.4 new cases per 100,000 residents over the past seven days, down from 375 a week earlier, with 23,428 new daily cases.

However, Health Minister Karl Lauterbach has warned that Germany faces “a massive fifth wave” of infections because of omicron, which he says can’t realistically be prevented.

The disease control center said Monday that people who have recovered or have been fully vaccinated now face a “high” risk of infection, while it is “moderate” for those who have received a booster. It said the risk of getting COVID-19 is “very high” for the unvaccinated.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Omicron casts shadow economic recovery
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/omicron-casts-a-new-shadow-over-economys-pandemic-/
GIST	<p>Just as Americans and Europeans were eagerly awaiting their most normal holiday season in a couple of years, the omicron variant has unleashed a fresh round of fear and uncertainty - for travelers, shoppers, party-goers and their economies as a whole.</p> <p>The Rockettes have canceled their Christmas show in New York. Some London restaurants have emptied out as commuters avoid the downtown. Broadway shows are canceling some performances. The National Hockey League suspended its games until after Christmas. Boston plans to require diners, revelers and shoppers to show proof of vaccination to enter restaurants, bars and stores.</p> <p>A heightened sense of anxiety has begun to erode the willingness of some people and some businesses to carry on as usual in the face of the extraordinarily contagious omicron variant, which has fast become the dominant version of the virus in the United States.</p> <p>Other people, though, are still traveling, spending and congregating with other people as they normally do, though often with a cautious wait-and-see perspective. Holiday air travel remains robust. Many stores and restaurants are still enjoying solid sales.</p>

At the same time, no one knows yet what omicron will ultimately mean for the health of the Western economies, which have endured a wild ride of downturns and recoveries since early 2020.

That Hurts: Washington can't stop run-heavy Eagles in loss

"These mutations keep coming," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the Institute of International Finance. "What is the probability that sometime we get a really nasty one? No one has any idea. This thing is mutating, and it's very, very hard to say."

Will omicron cause outbreaks at factories and ports, disrupt operations and worsen supply chain bottlenecks that have forced up prices and contributed to the hottest U.S. inflation in decades?

Will it mean people will hunker down at home again and spend less on services - restaurant meals, concerts, hotel stays - which could weaken the economy but potentially defuse inflationary pressures?

Will return-to-office plans for white collar workers be put on hold indefinitely, deepening the hit to many cities' downtown businesses?

Or will omicron prove a blip that scarcely slows what has become a surprisingly strong recovery from the short but intense pandemic recession?

Spooked by uncertainty and fear of the worst-case scenarios, stock markets around the world sold off for three days before rebounding Tuesday.

"We don't know whether this is good or bad for growth or inflation in the medium term," said Megan Greene, global chief economist at the Kroll Institute. "We just don't have enough data yet."

Unable to assess its longer-term consequences, businesses, consumers and policymakers have struggled to respond to the omicron threat.

Danielle Ballantyne, a Chicago dietitian, had planned to visit some stores and seek inspiration for holiday gifts. But as omicron spread, she scrapped that idea in favor of staying home and shopping online.

"From what I have been hearing in the news," Ballantyne said, "omicron is more contagious. So I am trying to be more selective in where I go in terms of big public spaces."

At its stores in big cities like New York and Chicago, the clothier Untuckit is reporting a 15% drop in traffic, similar to what it experienced when the delta variant started spreading last summer.

"It impacts people's perception of comfort and safety and their willingness to go out," said Aaron Sanandres, a co-founder of the company.

As infections have spread, European countries have so far gone further than the United States, with restrictions ranging from a full lockdown in the Netherlands to indoor mask mandates in the United Kingdom.

A theater in western England refunded \$240,000 in tickets. The Advantage Travel Group, which represents U.K. travel agents, said that business - flights, cruises and package holidays - plummeted 40% in mid-December from a month earlier. A diner in central Madrid absorbed cancellations for about half its booked space one week recently.

In London, downtown restaurants are suffering as office workers stay home.

"As soon as they said work from home, it's completely emptied," said Sally Abe, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in central London.

On Tuesday, Britain announced that it would provide \$1.3 billion in grants and other aid to help the hospitality industry survive omicron. The government bowed to pressure from pubs, restaurants and other businesses whose income has plunged in the aftermath of public health warnings.

Since the pandemic hit nearly two years ago, it has imposed one economic challenge after another. Economies all but shut down when the virus struck early last year. More than 22 million people in the United States alone lost jobs. Bars, restaurants and hotels were particularly devastated.

But record-high infusions of government spending and, eventually, the rollout of vaccines triggered an unexpectedly powerful recovery, giving many households the confidence and financial wherewithal to resume shopping. And it sparked optimism for the 2021 holiday season: In an updated forecast shortly before omicron emerged as a serious threat, the National Retail Federation said U.S. holiday sales were on track for a record-breaking year.

One fear now is that omicron infections will further disrupt manufacturing and shipping, worsen the supply chain backlogs and keep inflation simmering. It could also increase consumers' already intensified demand for goods, which would magnify the supply shortages.

"If everybody is freaked out that going to a bar or restaurant is going to land them in a hospital, they may continue to buy goods," said Greene, the Kroll Institute economist. "So that could exacerbate the short-term trend and make inflation worse."

On the other hand, she said, "if growth is really dampened [by omicron], that should take the heat off inflation."

There are other reasons to think the recovery could decelerate. In the United States, economic aid from federal spending and relief checks is fading. The Federal Reserve is reducing its economic support. China's economy, the world's second-biggest after the United States, is slowing.

For now, the U.S. bond market is signaling more concern about economic weakness than about runaway inflation: The yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note remains at historically low levels, below 1.5%.

That said, it's also possible that the economy will prove resilient against the latest challenge COVID has thrown at it. One measure of retail traffic shows that the new variant has made little difference - at least so far. For the week that ended Dec. 18, store traffic was up nearly 20% from a year earlier, though down 23% from the same week in the pre-pandemic year of 2019, according to Sensormatic Solutions. For the Black Friday that ended Nov. 27, sales were up 30% from last year.

Peter McCall, Sensormatic's head of retail consulting, noted that shoppers are still going to retail stores but are now favoring open-air shopping centers and outlet malls more than enclosed shopping centers.

Arnold Donald, CEO of Carnival Corp., the world's leading cruise company, said this week that Carnival had experienced "a little spike" in cancellations but predicted that it would prove just a short term blip.

"The booking patterns are strong," Donald said.

So is the traffic at some big retailers. Several hundred people lined up for the opening of the Toys R Us flagship store Sunday at the American Dream mall in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

"We were prepared for a big day, but it was even bigger than we thought," said Yehuda Shmidman, co-founder of WHP Retail, which owns Toys R Us.

Abt Electronics in Chicago says it's enjoying a strong holiday season so far, with sales up 10% from a year ago. But John Abt, co-president and a grandson of the company's founder, said he's noticed that

	<p>omicron is changing how some people shop. Though fewer customers are entering stores, there's increasing demand for curbside pickup.</p> <p>He's also made changes for workers designed to prevent the spread of COVID: He's requiring them to stay at the counters or warehouses where they work instead of jumping back and forth to different workplaces.</p> <p>"I am an optimist," Abt said. "I am not a worrier. This is life. And you have got to roll with the punches."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 Libya officials: presidential vote delay
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/libyan-presidential-vote-not-going-ahead-officials-confirm
GIST	<p>A Libyan parliamentary committee has said it has become impossible to hold a long-awaited presidential vote on Friday as scheduled.</p> <p>The widely expected announcement was the first official statement that the vote would not happen, amid mounting challenges and calls for a delay.</p> <p>The country's election commission had failed to name a final list of candidates, and it disbanded electoral committees late on Tuesday.</p> <p>Fears have been growing that a looming political vacuum will lead to renewed violence and economic chaos in the country.</p> <p>It has been a year of relative calm in Libya since a landmark October 2020 ceasefire after almost a decade of conflict, and the UN has been pushing for elections as part of a multi-pronged effort to cement the peace.</p> <p>Tensions have been building over whether the interim government of national unity can remain in office after its formal term expires on 24 December. Roadblocks and armed vehicles have begun to appear in parts of the capital, Tripoli, and four major oilfields have been shut due to their occupation by militia.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 Coronavirus cases rise across Asia
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/covid-cases-rise-across-asia-as-south-korea-sees-record-numbers-of-seriously-ill-thailand-restarts-quarantine
GIST	<p>South Korea is struggling to contain a surge in Covid-19 cases, reporting 7,456 infections on Wednesday and a record number of people with serious symptoms, as countries across Asia face a similar battle.</p> <p>The new infections bring South Korea's total to 583,065, while the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said the number of critically ill patients rose to a new high of 1,063.</p> <p>It is placing intense pressure on medical services, prompting the prime minister, Kim Boo-kyum, to commit to securing an additional 10,000 hospital beds for patients with moderate to serious symptoms by the middle of next month, the Yonhap news agency reported.</p> <p>South Korea now requires citizens over 18 to present a quarantine pass, proof of Covid vaccination or negative PCR test to access indoor sports events, cinemas and concert halls. Other new restrictions include social distancing measures that will last until at least 2 January, limiting gatherings to no more than four people and forcing restaurants, cafes and bars to close by 9pm.</p> <p>Neighbouring Japan has decided to extend strict border controls "for the time being", the prime minister, Fumio Kishida, said despite criticism from students waiting to take up university places and families who say they have been unfairly separated by the restrictions. Kishida had originally said those measures would stay in place until early January.</p>

Japan is recording comparatively [few daily cases](#), but Kishida warned of the need to remain vigilant, speed up the booster rollout and promote the use of orally administered Covid-19 drugs, the Kyodo news agency said.

Currently only citizens and foreign residents are permitted to enter Japan, and they must quarantine in government-designated facilities.

Thailand reported 2,532 new coronavirus cases and 31 deaths on Wednesday, according to the [ministry of health](#). It will reinstate mandatory Covid quarantine for foreign visitors and scrap a quarantine waiver from Tuesday, Reuters reported. The move was confirmed by the government, which said the action was being taken due to concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant.

China, where the pandemic began two years ago, is fighting local outbreaks in several cities, including key industrial hubs in the east and south. Authorities are determined to quash fresh outbreaks ahead of a crucial few weeks that include the Beijing Winter Olympics in February and a surge in domestic travel during the lunar new year.

China's [health authority](#) reported 77 new confirmed cases on Tuesday, down from 81 a day earlier. Of the new infections, 57 were locally transmitted, according to a statement by the National Health Commission, and mostly in the north-western province of Shaanxi.

The **Philippines** has halved the waiting time for a Covid-19 vaccine booster to three months after a second vaccination, in an attempt to prevent the spread of the Omicron variant. "We are exploring all possible options to safely mitigate the effects of more transmissible variants of Covid-19," said the health secretary, Francisco Duque.

The Philippines has received more than 192m doses of Covid-19 vaccines and fully inoculated about 44.2 million of its 110 million population, according to the government. Covid-19 cases have fallen to an average of 378 a day in December, from a peak of 18,579 daily in September, and the country has so far detected three imported cases of the Omicron variant.

The new variant is also present in **Singapore**, where authorities have discovered three Covid-19 cases linked to a gym, with two of them being Omicron, according to a report citing preliminary tests.

All three people were fully vaccinated and had mild symptoms, the health ministry said, adding that it was attempting to trace contacts. Singapore has so far detected 71 confirmed Omicron cases, with 65 imported and six local.

Indonesia has recorded 4,829 cases and 11 deaths in its latest reporting period, bringing its total caseload to 4.26 million with 144,024 deaths, according to government [health data](#). A total of 73.4% of eligible people have received at least one Covid vaccine dose and 51.8% have received two doses.

On Monday, Indonesia added people traveling from Britain, Norway and Denmark to the list of those [banned from entering the country](#), while Hong Kong was removed, senior minister Luhut Binsar Panjaitan said, according to Reuters. Indonesia identified its first case of the Omicron variant last week.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Antibody treatments: 2 of 3 fail on omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#hospitals-are-scrambling-as-antibody-treatments-fail-against-omicron
GIST	Hospitals, drug companies and Biden administration officials are racing to address one of the Omicron variant's biggest threats: Two of the three monoclonal antibody treatments that doctors have depended on to keep Covid-19 patients from becoming seriously ill do not appear to thwart the latest version of the coronavirus .

	<p>The one such treatment that is still likely to work against Omicron is now so scarce that many doctors and hospitals have already run through their supplies.</p> <p>Monoclonal antibodies have become a mainstay of Covid treatment, shown to be highly effective in keeping high-risk patients from being hospitalized. But even as infections surge and Omicron becomes the dominant form of new cases in the United States, some hospitals have begun scaling back the treatments, fearing they have become suddenly useless.</p> <p>In New York, hospital administrators at NewYork-Presbyterian, N.Y.U. Langone and Mount Sinai all said in recent days that they would stop giving patients the two most commonly used antibody treatments, made by Eli Lilly and Regeneron, according to memos obtained by The Times and officials at the health systems.</p> <p>“This is a dramatic change just in the last week or so,” said Dr. Daniel Griffin, an infectious disease specialist at Columbia University in New York. “And I think it makes sense.”</p> <p>Federal health officials plan to assess at the end of this week whether to pause shipments of the Eli Lilly and Regeneron products to individual states, based on how dominant Omicron becomes in different regions of the country, according to a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity.</p> <p>The one monoclonal antibody treatment that has performed well against Omicron in laboratory experiments is also the most recently authorized: sotrovimab, made by GlaxoSmithKline and Vir Biotechnology and cleared in May.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Holiday travel to jump amid omicron surge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#holiday-travel-in-the-us-is-expected-to-jump-even-as-omicron-spreads
GIST	<p>Millions of U.S. travelers are forging ahead with their holiday plans, despite a national surge in coronavirus cases fueled by the highly transmissible Omicron variant.</p> <p>More than 109 million Americans are expected to travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2, a 34 percent increase from last year, according to AAA. The number of airline passengers alone is projected to rise 184 percent from last year.</p> <p>And airport personnel are bracing for trouble. At Miami International Airport, which is expecting a record number of passengers for the holiday season, two men were arrested on Monday after the authorities said they clashed with police officers.</p> <p>The men — Mayfrer Gregorio Serranopaca, 30, of Kissimmee, Fla., and Alberto YanezSuarez, 32, of Odessa, Texas — were each charged with battery on a law enforcement officer, according to the Miami-Dade Police Department, which is investigating the episode. Mr. Serranopaca also faces additional charges, including resisting an officer with violence and inciting a riot.</p> <p>“Like airports across the country, MIA is seeing record-high passenger numbers this winter travel season,” Ralph Cutié, the airport’s director and chief executive officer, said in a statement.</p> <p>The Miami airport said it expected about 2.6 million travelers — an average of about 156,000 per day — to pass through its gates from Tuesday through Jan. 6, an increase of 6 percent over the same period in 2019.</p> <p>“Unfortunately, that passenger growth has come with a record-high increase nationwide in bad behavior as well,” Mr. Cutié said, noting the altercation at the airport on Monday.</p>

	<p>Disruptive passengers could face arrest, civil penalties up to \$37,000, being barred from flying and possible federal prosecution, Mr. Cutié said.</p> <p>He urged people to travel responsibly “by getting to the airport extra early, being patient, complying with the federal mask law and airport staff, limiting your alcohol consumption and notifying police at the first sign of bad behavior by calling 911.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 NBA to play; ‘learn to live with’ coronavirus
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/sports/basketball/nba-schedule-christmas-omicron.html
GIST	<p>A day after the N.H.L. announced it would start its winter break early because of a surge in coronavirus cases, the N.B.A. on Tuesday said that it had no plans to shut down for Christmas. In fact, Commissioner Adam Silver said the league had a responsibility to keep playing.</p> <p>“Frankly, we’re having trouble coming up with what the logic would be behind pausing right now,” Silver said in an interview with ESPN, adding, “It seems for us that the right and responsible thing to do, taking all the factors into consideration, is to continue to play.”</p> <p>The N.B.A.’s approach is much like that of most other North American team sports leagues, which appear determined to keep playing games and welcoming fans even as they scramble to fill rosters with athletes who are able to play.</p> <p>Although the N.B.A. does not plan to postpone any of its five nationally broadcast games on Christmas Day, which has become its annual showcase, it is busy devising contingency plans in case a team scheduled to play on Saturday has an outbreak of the virus.</p> <p>The league sent a memo to teams on Tuesday, warning of potential changes to start times on Saturday. The memo, obtained by The New York Times, said changes could be made until Friday, Christmas Eve.</p> <p>The N.H.L. announced on Monday that it would pause games and practices for five days, with practices resuming Sunday and games resuming Monday. So far, it has been alone among sports leagues in pausing a season amid the spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant. While the N.H.L. had planned to go ahead with the two games scheduled for Tuesday, one of those games was postponed because of coronavirus protocols, anyway.</p> <p>The N.F.L., marching toward the playoffs and the Super Bowl, had no plans to pause its season, even as its list of players sidelined because of Covid protocols had swelled. On Friday, the league moved three weekend games to Monday and Tuesday.</p> <p>The N.B.A. has used Christmas to showcase its best teams and story lines. This year, though, the games may not resemble the marquee matchups that were expected when the season started.</p> <p>More than 100 players and coaches have entered the N.B.A.’s coronavirus protocols in December alone, according to team injury reports and news conferences. Seven games have been postponed, including five announced on Monday. Teams are flying in players from their developmental league, or those who have been out of the N.B.A., to fill holes in their rosters.</p> <p>The only N.B.A. team that has reduced crowd sizes is the Toronto Raptors, who, because of restrictions in Ontario, have limited capacity to 50 percent.</p> <p>European sports were facing similar disruptions. In England, where six of last weekend’s 10 Premier League games were postponed after virus outbreaks left teams short of players, league officials continued to reject calls from some clubs to cancel more matches, and a busy holiday season of matches remained in doubt.</p>

In Scotland and Wales, government leaders announced that they would impose significant restrictions on fans in stadiums starting Sunday. Scottish sporting events will be “effectively spectator-free,” the country’s leader, Nicola Sturgeon, said, with crowds at outdoor events capped at 500 for as long as three weeks. In Wales, all sporting events will now be held behind closed doors for the same period.

Those kinds of crowd restrictions had been in place in parts of Germany for weeks. On Tuesday, though, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Germany’s regional bans on spectators and crowds would go national starting next Tuesday as part of a set of strict new rules that will limit the size of New Year’s parties to 10 people, close bars and nightclubs, and empty the country’s soccer stadiums.

“This is not the time for parties and cozy evenings with lots of people,” Scholz said.

Britain’s conservative government, under fire from critics over its handling of the pandemic and from allies who reject the idea of new lockdowns, has shown little interest in closing stadium doors again ahead of a crowded holiday soccer schedule. And the Premier League appears to be following that lead.

“While recognizing a number of clubs are experiencing Covid-19 outbreaks and challenges,” the Premier League said after a meeting of its clubs on Monday, “it is the league’s collective intention to continue the current fixture schedule where safely possible.”

Coronavirus cases in the Premier League more than doubled last week, to 90 from 42, and officials revealed that only three-quarters of the league’s players had received two vaccine doses and that 16 percent were unvaccinated — a stark contrast from soccer leagues in Spain and Italy but also American leagues like the N.F.L., the N.B.A. and the N.H.L., which have generally reported vaccinated rates of 95 percent or higher.

The N.B.A. is a highly vaccinated league. Silver said 97 percent of the league’s players had been vaccinated. According to a person familiar with the league’s numbers, 63 percent of the players eligible for a booster shot — those who are six months removed from completing their initial vaccine sequence — have been boosted. All players who are eligible but have not received booster shots are subjected to game-day testing.

Silver said 90 percent of the league’s positive cases were from the Omicron variant. He also said only a small number of players and coaches who have received three doses of a coronavirus vaccine have experienced breakthrough cases.

“We’re finding ourselves where we sort of knew we were going to get to for the past several months, and that is that this virus will not be eradicated and we’re going to have to learn to live with it,” Silver said in the ESPN interview. “That’s what we’re experiencing in the league right now.”

In March 2020, the N.B.A. was the first sports league to shut down operation because of the coronavirus when Rudy Gobert of the Utah Jazz tested positive for the virus. League officials are hoping they can provide a different kind of example this time.

“Our ability to find a way to keep operating is also significant for society,” Silver said in the interview, “to show that there are ways, despite living in this Covid era, that we can find a safe and responsible way to keep going.”

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HEADLINE	12/21 NYC mayor-elect cancels inauguration gala
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/nyregion/covid-omicron-nyc.html
GIST	It was billed as an inauguration ritual steeped in symbolism: Eric Adams, the second Black man to be elected mayor of New York, would be sworn in at Kings Theater, a lavishly restored cultural icon in Brooklyn, whose residents, he said, chose “one of their own” to lead the city’s recovery.

But the event will now serve as a less welcome symbol, reflecting the rising concerns about the rampant spread of the Omicron variant.

Mr. Adams, who takes office on Jan. 1, canceled the ceremony on Tuesday, one of several developments that underscored how the latest wave of coronavirus cases has thrown New York City's recovery into doubt and shifted priorities as the year ends.

The [number of reported cases in the city](#) has surged in recent days to more than 15,000 on Monday, the highest level since at least January and about four times the number of cases recorded just one week earlier.

Covid-19 hospitalizations in the city have been rising over the past month but are still at less than half the level of last winter's peak, reaching about 270 new admissions a day on Monday, according to New York State figures.

Northwell Health officials say that their 53 urgent care facilities in the New York City area are seeing unprecedented volume. About 4,000 to 5,000 patients are coming into those facilities daily, up from 2,000 normally, and most are seeking testing, said John D'Angelo, Northwell Health's chief of integrated operations. Positivity rates of those tests have gone from 7 percent a week ago to 14 percent now.

"I would expect that if that is going to translate to a steeper trajectory on the inpatient side, we should be seeing that in the next week or so," Mr. D'Angelo said. "So we'll see."

The Omicron variant made up 37 percent of cases in New York State over the last two weeks, according to state data, and 92 percent of new cases in a larger area that includes New York and New Jersey, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate released Monday. Now Mayor Bill de Blasio and his successor, Mr. Adams, face painful decisions about how to handle the next stage of the pandemic.

Will schools fully reopen in January? Will a New Year's Eve party in Times Square be canceled? How can the city avoid another broad shutdown or a shortage of hospital beds?

Already, Broadway shows have canceled performances, a handful of schools and some classrooms have closed, sporting events have been postponed and holiday travel plans have been abandoned. Some elected officials are calling for setting up a mass testing site at Javits Center in Manhattan, which served as a [temporary hospital during the height of the pandemic](#).

Mr. de Blasio, who is considering a run for governor next year, reiterated on Tuesday that he did not want to shut down the city. He said he would make a decision about the New Year's Eve celebration soon and noted that it would take place outdoors and vaccination would be required for attendees.

"We need to all work together now to get through these weeks to come out the other side and continue our recovery, but no shutdowns, because that would devastate the lives of so many New Yorkers," Mr. de Blasio said.

With hourslong lines now common outside testing sites, Mr. de Blasio said city officials were working to expand testing to 112 locations and were expected to get help from the Biden administration. The city has been testing more people than ever before, reaching nearly 130,000 P.C.R. tests one day last week.

In a sign of how severely the local testing infrastructure is being strained, the privately owned CityMD chain of urgent-care clinics said in [a message posted on its website late Tuesday](#) that it was temporarily closing 19 of its 150 locations in New York and New Jersey starting Wednesday "to preserve our ability to staff our sites."

Thirteen of the affected clinics are in New York City, three are in New Jersey, two are on Long Island and one is in Westchester County.

“It is our hope that closing sites now will best allow us to avoid future closures as this surge continues,” the company said in its message. Press representatives for CityMD did not immediately respond to requests for additional information, including how long the closings might last.

The mayor also announced on Tuesday a new \$100 incentive for New Yorkers who receive a booster shot — an urgent effort to blunt the worst impact of the surge in cases.

Mr. de Blasio said he was prepared to “spend whatever it takes” to make boosters a priority. More than [82 percent of adults in New York City are fully vaccinated](#), but only about a quarter of adult New Yorkers have received a booster shot, city officials said.

At a separate news conference, Mr. Adams, the mayor-elect, said that it was best to postpone his inauguration because he did not want to put people in a dangerous environment indoors. He had chosen the location in Flatbush, a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, as a tribute to his roots as the son of a house cleaner.

“I don’t need an inauguration — all I need is a mattress and a floor to execute being the mayor of the City of New York,” said Mr. Adams, who famously slept in his office during the height of the pandemic as Brooklyn borough president. It was not clear whether he would be sworn in at a private event.

Mr. de Blasio and Mr. Adams are both Democrats and political allies, and Mr. Adams has said he agrees with Mr. de Blasio’s approach to the pandemic, including setting vaccine mandates for city workers and indoor dining. The current and future mayors appeared at a news conference together on Sunday to show a united front.

Mr. Adams has made a flurry of appointments in recent days, but he has not said whom he would name as health commissioner — a key role in leading the city’s pandemic strategy.

Mr. Adams is planning to keep Dr. Dave Chokshi, whom Mr. de Blasio named to the post in August 2020, as health commissioner for several months to keep continuity in the city’s Covid response, according to someone who is familiar with the mayor-elect’s plans.

Dr. Ashwin Vasan, the president of [Fountain House](#), a mental health and public health charity, will take over as health commissioner in the spring, Politico [reported](#) late Tuesday.

Mr. Adams was elected in November when cases were much lower in the city. Even when he won the Democratic primary over the summer, the conversation around the pandemic centered on the city’s ability to recover from it.

But the Omicron-fueled surge will confront Mr. Adams with an immediate and vexing challenge when he takes office.

One major question he will face is how to handle the reopening of schools in January. Teachers and school staff are required to be vaccinated, and Mr. de Blasio has said he is considering requiring a booster shot as well. But Mr. de Blasio has been adamant that he does not want to set a vaccine mandate for students, as Los Angeles has, because it could prompt some parents to keep their children at home.

Brad Lander, who will take office as city comptroller on Jan. 1, has urged Mr. Adams and Mr. de Blasio to create a plan for all students and staff — which would mean close to a million students, 75,000 teachers and thousands of other staff members — to be tested during the weekend before school resumes.

Mr. Lander, Mr. Adams and Jumaane Williams, the city's public advocate who recently tested positive for the virus, issued a joint statement on Tuesday announcing that they were postponing the inauguration ceremony and urging New Yorkers to get boosted.

"We encourage all New Yorkers to get vaccinated, get boosted and get tested," the statement said. "That is our pathway out of this pandemic, and we will come out of it together."

(Representative Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican who represents Staten Island and part of Brooklyn, disclosed on Tuesday that she has also tested positive; she said she had been vaccinated and was experiencing mild symptoms.)

With many New Yorkers' holiday plans at risk and with cases surging, the time it takes to get test results has also increased at some locations. Letitia James, the New York state attorney general, issued a warning letter to LabQ Diagnostics, a Brooklyn-based laboratory with [dozens of mobile locations](#) across New York City, about falsely advertising that results are available within 48 hours.

A new vaccine mandate for all private employers in New York City takes effect on Dec. 27. But some businesses have already closed because of outbreaks or asked employees to work remotely. Citigroup gave its New York and New Jersey staff the option to work remotely, and CNN closed its U.S. offices to all employees who are able to work remotely.

On Broadway, a half-dozen or so shows were suspended because of virus concerns; on Monday, the rock musical "[Jagged Little Pill](#)" became the first major show to permanently close, in part, because of the resurgent pandemic.

Andrew Rigie, the executive director of the New York City Hospitality Alliance, said that the spike in cases was another "gut punch" for restaurants and bars. He said that his organization had heard from dozens that had closed for a few days or were considering it.

"It's a struggle — these restaurants have been devastated over the past almost two years," he said. "They were hoping for a busy holiday season to pay off debt and move forward."

Restaurants and bars in New York City employed nearly 325,000 people before April 2020, which then plummeted to fewer than 90,000, according to [data](#) from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. The industry now employs about 225,000 people.

Kathryn Wylde, head of the Partnership for New York City, a business group, said that most big companies had canceled in-person events for the rest of the year and postponed mandatory return-to-office policies. She said she was increasingly hearing April as a probable date for asking workers to return to offices.

"As this lingers," she said, "it makes a return to what was prepandemic normal even more difficult."

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HEADLINE	12/21 Moderate quake rattles parts of Alaska
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/us/earthquake-alaska-anchorage.html
GIST	<p>A 5.9-magnitude earthquake struck southwestern Alaska on Tuesday afternoon, causing moderate shaking that was felt in Anchorage, the U.S. Geological Survey said.</p> <p>There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries near the epicenter in Port Alsworth, a remote community with fewer than 200 residents some 135 miles southwest of Anchorage, said Michelle Torres, a spokeswoman for the Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.</p> <p>Still, residents in the area of the earthquake and in Anchorage felt some strong shaking, said Jana Pursley, a geophysicist at U.S.G.S.</p>

Jonathan Tytell, a geophysicist at U.S.G.S, said there would most likely not be a tsunami warning. The earthquake, which occurred about 2 p.m., was 94 miles below the Earth's surface, a depth too deep to generate a powerful tsunami, he said.

There were no reports of aftershocks as of Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Tytell said, adding that the chances of strong aftershocks later in the evening were "small, but not impossible."

"The chances of it are rare enough that I wouldn't worry," he said.

At least 134 people in the state reported to the U.S.G.S. that they felt shaking.

But Alaskans are used to that because there are "earthquakes going off all the time there," Mr. Tytell said. [The Alaska Earthquake Center reported](#) more than 49,000 seismic events in the state and nearby regions in 2020. The center also said that Alaska had recorded last year's most powerful and third-most powerful earthquakes worldwide.

In July 2021, a 8.2-magnitude [earthquake](#) struck off the southern coast of the state and prompted a tsunami warning. It was [the largest earthquake](#) in the United States in 50 years, [seismologists said](#), but the state was spared any major damage.

Last December, a [6.4-magnitude earthquake struck](#) off the coast of a remote area of southern Alaska, but it did not spark any tsunami warnings that could threaten the region's sparsely populated string of islands.

In 1964, Alaska wasn't as fortunate. The [second-most powerful earthquake](#) in world history, a magnitude 9.2, violently shook the state, killing more than 130 people and causing massive tsunamis.

That earthquake occurred about 15 miles below the Earth's surface and its epicenter was about 90 miles east of Anchorage, Mr. Tytell said, distances that made it much more powerful than Tuesday's earthquake. "Within the next week," he said, "the chance of a magnitude 6 or higher is about 5 percent."

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HEADLINE	12/21 Omicron turns Europe's busy season silent
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/business/omicron-europe-business.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Business
GIST	<p>"You could feel Christmas was coming," Amanda Whiteside, a manager at Gordon's Wine Bar in London, said of the crowds and buzz. "And then it was gone."</p> <p>Throughout Britain and in other parts of Europe, new government restrictions combined with heightened anxiety over the highly contagious Omicron variant of the coronavirus have drastically reduced business at restaurants, pubs, event venues and stores, prompting urgent calls for additional government assistance.</p> <p>In Britain, the government responded Tuesday, announcing 1 billion pounds (\$1.3 billion) in aid for the hospitality industry, with one-time grants of £6,000 and rebates for employees' sick leave.</p> <p>The additional assistance was promised as a fresh wave of anxiety over the economy washes over the region. In France, government ministers announced Tuesday additional aid up to 12 million euros for travel agencies, events, caterers and indoor leisure companies that suffer big operating losses this month.</p> <p>In Spain, the government has scheduled an emergency meeting with regional leaders on Wednesday to discuss whether to adopt new restrictions. Italy's government is meeting on Thursday.</p> <p>"We are in a different phase now where lockdown will be potentially more costly," said Claus Vistlesen, chief eurozone economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. "Up until now, we've been used to lockdowns</p>

followed by support from the government. I think that will be the case as well, but support will be more conditional, less comprehensive than before.”

Britain recorded the highest number of Covid-19 cases in Europe over the last seven days, according to the World Health Organization.

On Monday, organizations representing more than 100,000 businesses around the country sent an [open letter](#) to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, demanding more tax relief and grants to tide them over.

Such concerns were echoed elsewhere. In Germany, businesses are pressing the government to lift [new requirements](#) that customers must show proof of vaccination or recent recovery. And in the Netherlands, where the government announced a [lockdown](#) over the weekend, calls to the nation’s [business registry](#) asking for help climbed past 400 on Monday — seven times the number logged the previous Monday.

Although the surge of coronavirus cases brought on by the fast-moving Omicron variant has not yet resulted in the kind of strict lockdown imposed by the Dutch government, British businesses argue that the combination of mask mandates, vaccination requirements and uncertainty during the peak holiday season imperils their survival.

The retail, hospitality and leisure sectors “are teetering on the brink,” said Matthew Sims, who helped orchestrate the campaign and leads a business improvement group in Croydon, south of London.

Restaurants, pubs and bars have said that since the government added a new series of restrictions, known as Plan B, on Dec. 8 as a response to Omicron, cancellations have been rolling in and foot traffic has disappeared in some areas.

At Gordon’s Wine Bar, it was common to find every table in its cavelike cellar and on its outdoor patio full and a long line of customers waiting. Then Plan B was put in place.

The drop-off, said Ms. Whiteside, the administrative manager, “was very dramatic.”

Customers thinned out, and several staff members got Covid, she said. Gordon’s is now offering only outside service, and Ms. Whiteside estimates that sales are down 25 percent.

Half a mile away, in Soho, the Coach and Horses pub was similarly contending with fewer customers and sick staff. Last week, business was off by a third, while on Monday it fell “off the edge of a cliff,” said Alison Ross, the manager.

Three of the four full-time staff members and two of the four part-timers had contracted Covid.

The hospitality industry, which lost out on the holiday bump in sales last year, was counting on a busy season this year.

Simon Emeny, the chief executive of Fuller, Smith & Turner, which owns roughly 400 pubs including the Coach and Horses, said in a statement: “We are right back to where we were in March 2020 with the government keeping hospitality open, while effectively telling the public not to socialize.”

The company has temporarily closed 20 pubs, a spokeswoman said.

About 200,000 hospitality and leisure businesses will be eligible for the new grants. The government will also cover the cost of legally required sick pay for small and midsize businesses and is topping up a culture fund for organizations including theaters, orchestras and museums, with another £30 million.

From sectors not included in the package, there were complaints.

“Travel agents, tour operators and travel management companies will rightly be asking why they haven’t been given the same treatment as other businesses that are suffering at this time,” said ABTA, a trade association of travel agencies and tour operators.

In the Netherlands, where most shops, bars, restaurants, gyms, outdoor sports, cultural venues and schools are closed through January, some business owners fear they may never reopen.

“That is something that I ask myself every day,” said Omar Waseq, who owns a cheese bar and film cafe in the center of Utrecht. “I’m not 100 percent sure.”

Mr. Waseq estimated that he is losing \$50,000 each month while his cheese bar, Kaasbar Utrecht, is shuttered, and \$100,000 at the cafe. Plans to rebuild a nightclub he owns that was burned in a fire in January have been postponed. He has had to let go most of his 80-person staff and is now trying to make money selling mulled wine in the streets and cheese packages door to door.

Mr. Waseq said that because he opened his business after the pandemic began and did not have 2019 sales to use as a benchmark comparison, he was not eligible for government assistance.

Ron Sinnige, a spokesman for the national business registry, the Kamer van Koophandel, said the agency was flooded with calls this week asking about financial assistance, advice or liquidating their operations. Some were seeking guidance on how to qualify as an essential business — could a clothing store sell candy and soda, could a beauty salon offer postsurgical massages or list Botox injections as a medical procedure?

The questions were a sign of people’s creativity and despair, Mr. Sinnige said. “As opposed to previous lockdowns, people are really at the end of their financial flexibility and emotional flexibility,” he said.

France has canceled a menu of year-end celebrations and barred tourists from Britain, a blow to the ski industry.

On Tuesday, the Swedish government imposed some new restrictions that included allowing only seated customers to be served in restaurants and bars.

Ireland imposed an early curfew of 8 p.m. on restaurants and bars that began on Monday, while limiting attendance at events.

In Denmark, restaurants and bars must cut off serving alcohol after 10 p.m., and a slate of venues and event spaces including theaters, museums, zoos, concert halls and Tivoli, Copenhagen’s landmark amusement park, have been closed.

Switzerland’s restrictions that bar unvaccinated people from going to restaurants, gyms and museums are expected to last until Jan. 24.

In Germany, the check-in process at stores, which requires stopping everyone at the door and asking to see vaccination certification and an ID, was deterring shoppers at what would normally be the busiest time of the year, the German Trade Association said.

Retailers surveyed by the group reported a 37 percent drop in sales from Christmas 2019.

“After months of lockdowns, the restrictions are once again bringing many retailers to the edge of their existence,” said Stefan Genth, head of the Trade Association.

A court in the northern state of Lower Saxony last week threw out the restrictions there, after the Woolworth department store chain challenged them on grounds that they were not fairly applied and that requiring shoppers to wear masks provided sufficient protection. The ruling on Thursday raised hopes that other states would follow its lead, giving a final boost to last-minute shoppers.

	“Last weekend was better, but overall the shopping season has been more than depressing,” said Mark Alexander Krack, head of the Lower Saxony Trade Association.
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HEADLINE	12/22 Omicron turns season of joy into weariness
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/22/us/omicron-virus-worry-dread.html
GIST	<p>MIAMI — The Omicron variant has turned a season of joy into one of weariness and resentment amid a new coronavirus surge.</p> <p>With days to go before Christmas, Americans are sick and tired of being sick and tired. Of reworking plans to adapt to the latest virus risks. Of searching for at-home tests and not finding them. Of wondering whether, after two years of avoiding Covid-19, or surviving it, or getting vaccinated and maybe even boosted, Omicron is the variant they inevitably catch.</p> <p>A sense of dread about Omicron’s rapid spread — the fastest of any variant yet — has swept through the Northeast and Upper Midwest, which were already swamped with Delta variant cases and hospitalizations. And unease has burgeoned even in states and territories like Florida, Hawaii and Puerto Rico that had moved past a terrible summer of Delta and, until recently, experienced a relative virus lull.</p> <p>“I’m mad,” said Mabel De Beunza, a publicist in her early 40s who spent 90 minutes at a drive-through testing line in downtown Miami on Monday after experiencing cold symptoms. No matter what her test result, she has decided against seeing her mother, who is immunocompromised, on Christmas.</p> <p>“We’ve done so much, and still have this,” said Ms. De Beunza, whose family is vaccinated and boosted. “It’s been such a rough year.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, President Biden took new action to combat the surge, pledging to deploy 1,000 military medical professionals to hospitals, open new testing and vaccination sites and distribute 500 million rapid tests to the public for free. Some state officials have also imposed new vaccination and mask requirements.</p> <p>“I know you’re tired,” Mr. Biden said from the White House. “I know you’re frustrated.”</p> <p>He emphasized that the tools available to prevent, diagnose and treat Covid are much more plentiful now than they were in the earliest days of the pandemic. “We should all be concerned about Omicron but not panicked,” he said. “This is not March of 2020.”</p> <p>Conversations with more than two dozen people across the country revealed that, more than panicked, Americans are simply exhausted by the emotional pandemic roller coaster and confused by mixed messages from experts and leaders about appropriate precautions.</p> <p>Alyssa Dipirro, 30, was waiting in line for a Covid test in Orlando, Fla., on Tuesday but had not been vaccinated. Earlier in the pandemic, she did not want to do so while pregnant, despite assurances from public health experts that the shots were safe for pregnant women.</p> <p>Since then, she has not been reassured by reports of vaccinated people getting Covid infections, as is happening more frequently with Omicron, even though the vaccines remain effective at warding off severe disease. “They still have to get tested if they get exposed,” she said. “So what’s the point of this?”</p> <p>Florida, which long ago did away with almost all virus restrictions, is recording an average of 7,068 daily coronavirus cases, a 294 percent increase over the past two weeks, according to data compiled by The New York Times.</p>

The rise was sudden and jarring after a couple of months of relative virus quiet that followed [a Delta surge](#) that killed more than 22,000 Floridians, more than any previous virus wave, according to Jason L. Salemi, an epidemiologist at the University of South Florida.

But winter is Florida's high season, drawing part-time residents and throngs of visitors. Some attendees reported testing positive for Covid this month after going to events related to the [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) fair.

On Tuesday, CDR Health, a contractor providing monoclonal antibody treatments at some state-run clinics, temporarily closed its sites in Miami-Dade, Broward, Lee and St. Lucie Counties because of a lack of supply. The Florida Department of Health insisted that some sites closed for training but acknowledged that some appointments had to be rescheduled and that the state was trying to secure a resupply.

"All my friends in Miami have Covid right now," Fabiana Vegas, 21, said on Tuesday as she waited in line to get tested in Orlando. "I wanted to go to Miami this Christmas, and I can't."

Cases have also skyrocketed in Hawaii, with the state reporting a daily average that is 468 percent higher than it was two weeks ago, [according to data from The Times](#).

Hilton R. Raethel, president of the Healthcare Association of Hawaii, called the increase dramatic and blamed pandemic fatigue for the low rates of booster shots among residents. About 17 percent of fully vaccinated residents had received a booster as of Sunday, the second-lowest rate in the country.

"I've done so much for so long, I'm sort of reluctant to do any more," Mr. Raethel said, summarizing public sentiment.

Nowhere has there been a larger explosion of cases than in Puerto Rico, which has recorded a daily average of 1,098 — a 762 percent increase from two weeks ago, [according to data from The Times](#). The island has reported more cases in the past seven days than any other week in the pandemic, prompting Gov. Pedro R. Pierluisi to authorize new restrictions, including requiring vaccinations and negative tests for large events.

Marisa Gómez Cuevas, 34, tested positive after going out to a bar in Old San Juan to meet friends that she had not seen in months. A few days later, she started getting calls from some of those friends, saying they felt sick. One ended up in a hospital.

She lost a gig she had with a theater production last week, and is scared to return to her waitressing job. "I worry there will be another outbreak, and it will have to close again," she said of the small family-owned restaurant where she works.

In other parts of the country that have been suffering from high caseloads for longer, restrictions have offered residents some peace of mind. Boston mandated proof of vaccines in restaurants and other indoor spaces on Monday, giving some relief to Christopher Glionna, the managing partner at the Aquitaine Group, which owns several eateries in the city's South End.

"It is good for business," he said. "People want to get together."

And many people said they intended to keep their holiday travel plans, regardless of the news about Omicron. At a train station in Providence, R.I., on Monday, Sheryl Leary, 51, and her husband, Sean Leary, 53, prepared to leave for New York. The Rockettes concert they had tickets for was canceled, but they were still on to see "Wicked" on Broadway. Both Learys are vaccinated.

"We don't want to have Covid or give it to anyone," Ms. Leary said. But, her husband added, those concerns were not enough to scrap their trip.

"It's part of life," Mr. Leary said of the virus. "What are you going to do, stay home?"

	<p>Still, in states that have not yet experienced the latest virus surge, some people are already on edge.</p> <p>In Berkeley, Calif., Brian Edwards-Tiekert, 43, a public radio host, and his wife changed their Covid protocols this week after realizing how fast Omicron was spreading.</p> <p>“We’re not going to see anyone without testing,” he said. “And we’re upgrading from cloth masks to N95s or the equivalent.”</p> <p>His wife ran out to pharmacies in search of at-home rapid tests and found only three — enough to use before a dinner they have planned for Wednesday, but not to prepare for another social engagement on Thursday.</p> <p>The emotional whiplash inherent in all the worry and planning is draining, Mr. Edwards-Tiekert said, describing two tabs permanently open on his web browser: the California rain forecast and a Covid tracking dashboard.</p> <p>“I guess I’m a little bit numbed at this point,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 France, Italy crackdown vaccination fraud
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#france-italy-covid-vaccination-fakes
GIST	<p>Several countries in Europe are reporting growing instances of fake Covid passes and vaccination certificates — an indication that the vaccine resistance that threatened earlier this year to upend governments’ anti-Covid strategies is far from over.</p> <p>In France, the authorities said on Monday that they had detected over 180,000 fake Covid passes since the measure was introduced this summer. And in Italy on Tuesday, the police in the Sicilian capital, Palermo, arrested a leader of an anti-vaccine movement and a nurse who is accused of accepting payments for pretend vaccinations.</p> <p>Officials in France said on Friday that soon only vaccinated people would be eligible for Covid passes, which are required for entry into restaurants, cafes and other public places. The news of the forgeries highlighted how vaccine resistance remains strong in parts of the country’s population.</p> <p>Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin said this month that about 400 investigations had been opened into networks of people suspected of providing the fake passes, including some connected to health professionals.</p> <p>The French news media recently reported several cases of doctors suspected of having sold fake Covid passes. The Covid death of a woman in a Paris regional hospital this month after she showed a fake vaccine certificate has also drawn scrutiny.</p> <p>In Sicily, the police in Palermo said that a nurse had been paid 100 to 400 euros (\$113 to \$451) to pretend to inoculate people at a vaccination center so that they could obtain a Green Pass, a health document that is required in Italy to work and to participate in many social activities.</p> <p>A video aired in the Italian news media showed what the police described as a nurse injecting vaccine doses into a gauze pad and then pretending to inject the contents of empty syringes into people’s arms.</p> <p>The police arrested Filippo Accetta, a local anti-vaccines campaigner; Anna Maria Lo Brano, a nurse; and another man on accusations of bribery, embezzlement and falsification of an official document.</p>

	Eight other people are thought to have been falsely vaccinated at the Palermo hub, according to Francesco Lo Voi, the local prosecutor. He said an initial investigation suggested that other health workers at the center had been unaware of the fraud.
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HEADLINE	12/21 EU: Covid travel passes expire after 9mo.
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#eu-covid-pass
GIST	<p>The European Union said on Tuesday that from next year, people would be allowed to travel freely within the bloc only if they had received booster shots or had been fully vaccinated within the previous nine months.</p> <p>That expiration date on Covid passes, which show the holders' vaccination status and facilitate travel within the bloc, comes as Europe faces a surge of cases that has led many countries to impose further restrictions, including lockdowns reminiscent of measures imposed earlier in the pandemic, limits on gatherings, mask mandates and early closing times for restaurants and bars.</p> <p>"It's now up to the member states to ensure boosters will be rolled out swiftly to protect our health and ensure safe traveling," Didier Reynders, the bloc's commissioner for justice, said in a statement.</p> <p>The new rules, which are set to come into force on Feb. 1, aim to standardize travel across the bloc. But even with the rules, individual countries can still decide whether to require visitors to quarantine or show proof of a negative test upon entry. The change also does not affect domestic passes that some countries require for entry into public places like bars and restaurants.</p> <p>Covid passes first came into effect in the bloc in July, enabling free movement for anyone who was fully vaccinated, had proof of recovery or could present a negative P.C.R. test. But with rising infections, including Omicron cases, and growing evidence of the waning protection of vaccines, E.U. officials say that an additional dose is necessary.</p> <p>The new nine-month limit comes as some countries have already set time limits on their national Covid passes. In France, all adults must receive an additional dose by mid-January for their passes to remain valid. In Austria, Covid passes are valid for nine months after a second vaccine dose.</p> <p>Most member states are well underway in administering booster shots to adults, although the rollout is uneven across the continent. More than 67 percent of the bloc's population is fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, and about 14 percent have received an additional dose.</p> <p>Demonstrators across Europe have staged protests over vaccine passports since they have been proposed and introduced. Since France announced this year that people would be required to show vaccine passports to go to restaurants, cafes and other public places, tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets each week, including about 25,000 people last weekend.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Military's missing weapons problem
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/new-reforms-target-us-militarys-missing-weapons-pr/
GIST	<p>The Department of Defense is overhauling how it keeps track of its guns and explosives, and Congress is requiring more accountability from the Pentagon — responses to an Associated Press investigation that showed lost or stolen military weapons were reaching America's streets.</p> <p>The missing weaponry includes assault rifles, machine guns, handguns, armor-piercing grenades, artillery shells, mortars, grenade launchers and plastic explosives.</p> <p>The Pentagon will now have to give lawmakers an annual report on weapons loss and security under the National Defense Authorization Act, which Congress approved this month and President Joe Biden is</p>

expected to sign. As AP's AWOL Weapons investigation showed, military officials weren't advising Congress even as guns and explosives continued to disappear.

To meet those reporting requirements, the military is modernizing how it accounts for its millions of firearms and mountains of explosives.

"Clearly the accountability on this issue was stopping at too low of a level," said U.S. Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colorado, a U.S. Army veteran and member of the House Armed Services Committee who supported the reforms. With the new requirements, "if there are hundreds of missing weapons in that report, members of Congress are going to see it and they are going to be asked about it publicly and held accountable for it."

Pentagon officials have said that they can account for more than 99.9% of firearms, and take weapons security very seriously. Still, when AP published its first report on missing firearms in June, Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he would consider a "systematic fix."

In response, the Army, the largest branch with the most firearms, took on a major overhaul of how units report missing, lost or stolen weapons. Paper records are giving way to a digital form, and a central logistics operations center is collecting and verifying serious incident reports that - as with other armed services - didn't always go all the way up the chain of command.

The new system uses an existing software system called Vantage to give commanders a real-time look at what is unaccounted for, Scott Forster, an operations research analyst at the Army, said in a briefing with AP.

Other changes will affect how the military responds to law enforcement investigations.

When a gun is recovered or sought during a criminal case, the Defense Department's Small Arms and Light Weapons Registry is supposed to determine the last known location or unit responsible. But the registry's information was inaccurate and responses to law enforcement weren't timely, according to internal Army documents obtained by the AP. (The Army runs the registry for the Pentagon.)

The Army is now developing an app that would search each service's own property record databases, according to Army spokesman Lt. Col. Brandon Kelley.

The new law also requires the Defense Secretary to report confirmed thefts or recovery of weapons to the National Crime Information Center, which the FBI runs. Military regulations had required the services and units to self-report losses; the onus will now be on the highest level of the Pentagon.

The other armed services also are implementing reforms.

The Marine Corps said it is developing internal procedures for improved oversight through increased inspections of units. The Navy required units to notify a higher headquarters when reporting weapons losses. The Air Force has replaced its munitions property book system with a commercial application.

This summer, the Defense Logistics Agency began reporting to the Pentagon losses and thefts of firearms that the military loaned to civilian agencies under the Law Enforcement Support Office program. In its data release to AP, the Pentagon reported that 461 of these firearms had vanished, with 109 later recovered. AP's reporting did not include LESO weapons.

After the AP's initial report was published in June, Gen. Milley tasked the service branches with scrubbing their data on firearms losses since 2010 — the time period AP studied.

The Pentagon reluctantly shared the statistics it collected, which Milley's office has provided to Capitol Hill. The official numbers are lower than what AP reported — but also incomplete because some services failed to include stolen weapons as documented by the military's own criminal investigators.

The number of missing, lost or stolen firearms was “approximately 1,540” from 2010 through this summer, according to LTC Uriah Orland, a spokesman for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The majority have been recovered, he said. That total compares to the at least 2,000 firearms that AP had reported for 2010 through 2020, a tally was based on the military’s own data, internal memoranda, criminal investigation case files and other sources.

There are several reasons for the discrepancy. In conducting their analyses, each service used different standards and systems. Despite the detailed data search by each service, AP found lost or stolen items that were not in their official accounting.

Relying on its official weapons registry, the Navy data represented that none of its shotguns have been stolen and its only explosives losses during the 2010s were 20 concussion grenades. AP identified several shotguns and dozens of armor-piercing grenades, based on case files from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

The Marines decided that any weapon that vanished in a combat zone didn’t count — even in cases, for example, when a rifle fell from a vehicle or aircraft or disappeared from living quarters on an overseas base. Their total of “unaccounted for” firearms since 2010 was 31.

The biggest explanation for the difference between AP’s numbers and official numbers is a significant downward revision of Army totals.

In June, AP reported the Army couldn’t account for more than 1,500 weapons. Most of that total derived from internal Army memos that said 1,300 rifles and handguns were lost or stolen between 2013 and 2019. The Army had said the memos could include duplications and combat losses, which AP excluded when known.

Responding to Milley’s order, personnel hand-searched records. Their conclusion was that, in the 2010s, only 469 firearms were missing.

Army officials didn’t detail which weapons they excluded or their criteria for reaching the total, which AP was unable to verify independently.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Busiest ports grapple with the holidays
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/21/inside-americas-busiest-port-during-holidays
GIST	<p>The holiday season at the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, America’s busiest shipping complex, has always been hectic. But 2021 is a year unlike any other.</p> <p>A pandemic-induced buying boom and supply chain crisis led to an unprecedented backlog of ships lingering offshore and towering stacks of colorful containers clogging the entirety of the dockyard. Inside the port, thousands of workers are laboring around the clock to unload these containers one by one, sending the televisions, bicycles, medical supplies and more that they contain out to trains and waiting truckers, whose rigs stretch into nearby residential neighborhoods. The goods eventually make their way to warehouses and stores and into the arms of eager consumers.</p> <p>“It’s like being on a freeway in traffic”, Danny Miranda, the president of ILWU Local 94, the union that represents dockworkers, said of the port complex. “There’s nowhere to go. Every space is being utilized.”</p> <p>The frantic holiday season caps an unprecedented year for the port. Climbing consumer sales, worker shortages and the slowdown of major transportation hubs during the pandemic created a crisis in the global supply chain, leading to increasing costs and shortages of goods and containers.</p>

In June, the Los Angeles port became the first in the western hemisphere to process 10m container units in a 12-month period. Month after month, the complex has regularly seen record-breaking numbers of cargo ships stuck waiting in nearby waters. The backlog, which left some ships idling in the waters outside the ports for weeks, [churning out pollutants](#), is creating challenges for consumers and retailers alike, particularly amid the holiday season.

“The last quarter of the year is always busy. You get out of the summer, bathing suits and lawn chairs and you get into the normal Christmas flow of cargo,” said Miranda, who started working at the port in 1978. “Never before have we had this much cargo come to our port in my experience.”

Local officials and the Biden administration are working to reduce the backlog, including moving to 24/7 operations. But with a shortage of truck drivers to transport the goods and warehouse space to hold them, a return to normal levels of traffic is still far.

As the pandemic took hold in the US, it brought lockdowns and restricted access to services, which sent consumer spending on goods surging. Americans are continuing to spend significantly more on goods than ever before and the supply chain is struggling to keep up.

“Americans are buying 20-25% more containers from China. If you have a system that is designed to grow between 2-4% and you ask it to grow overnight by 25% ... It’s not feasible,” Edward Renwick, vice-president of the Los Angeles board of harbor commissioners, said at a recent board meeting.

The increased consumer demand, along with supply chain issues and a steady backlog of ships outside the ports which together move 40% of container imports in the US – are certain to affect holiday shopping this year. Experts expect to see shortages of items such as bicycles, toys and personal electronics and long delays for home appliances.

“I think there’s gonna be quite a few things that are not going to be available for Christmas,” said Bill Michels, vice-president of operations, Americas at Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply. “I don’t think people will be able to get the kinds of gifts they were intending to get. There’s gonna be less choices.”

Retailers have encouraged consumers to buy early this holiday season. Meanwhile, the port complex has been working for months to address the backlog, teaming up with the Biden administration to find solutions, expanding working hours, pushing companies to clear out empty containers more quickly and securing additional storage space.

In the early days of the pandemic, the ports were almost at a standstill, Miranda recalled, as imports slowed dramatically with Covid-19, creating supply chain issues around the world. Infections, too, slowed things; at one point earlier this year, before the widespread availability of vaccines, just over 5% of the [15,000 dockworkers](#) at the two ports were infected with the coronavirus. Twenty-two workers have died of Covid over the course of the pandemic.

“The pandemic created a lot of different things. People want their next day delivery. Amazon created that model and now we’re all stuck with it,” Miranda said. “People stayed home bunkered down during the pandemic and started utilizing online shopping. That’s where I think it started.”

Port employees are moving more cargo than the complex has seen in more than a century of operation. Marine terminals are operating above 100% capacity to handle the surge, Gene Seroka, the LA port executive director, said at a recent meeting of the Los Angeles board of harbor commissioners.

“There is no one lever that we’re gonna pull that simply gets all this cargo moving out of anchor as quickly as anyone would like,” Seroka said. “It’s all of these succinct efforts in unison that will continue to free up our docks to move more cargo.”

Reducing the backlog at the port complex will ultimately require more truck drivers, experts warn, and a decrease in consumer demand. America needs [about 80,000 more drivers](#) than it currently has, according to the industry's main trade body – a shortage fueled by low pay, long hours and challenging work conditions.

California has increased the weight of loads truck drivers are allowed to carry on state highways and expanded the department of motor vehicles' capacity to hand out commercial licenses. But without significantly more drivers to transport goods, the backlog will remain, said Katheryn Russ, an economics professor at UC Davis.

"The only thing that will solve this, is having more truckers," Russ said. "The most effective thing [would be] a boost in trucking wages and that lies with the trucking companies."

Supply chain issues can also serve as a wakeup call for consumers to consider their buying behavior, Russ said. "It gives me a reminder of the excess in my daily life," she said. "That's not the case for everybody but for a lot of us, we have too much stuff, so it's a great reminder of how we can be gentler to the environment."

Miranda and port officials are hopeful that the \$1.2bn infrastructure bill recently signed by Joe Biden will help alleviate long-term issues, with \$17bn set to go to ports. Investments in the rail industry will also expand capacity, which will allow goods to move out more quickly.

But in the meantime, the best approach to eliminate supply chain shortages, Russ said, is mitigating the spread of Covid-19, increasing the availability of rapid testing and resolving the pandemic.

"Everyone who is complaining about supply chain shortages, whether it's top of the government or people on the street doing the shopping, we should all be thinking what can we do to stop the pandemic," she said. "There are things we can all do: masks, we can wash our hands, we can get vaccinated.

"Those are all things we, as individuals, can do and should do as a patriotic duty to help the world to mitigate the virus and that will help our economy and prevent these supply chain related shortages."

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HEADLINE	12/21 Workplace stress rampant; workers burnout
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/worker-burnout-resignations-pandemic-stress--11640099198?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>In the first 10 months of this year, America's workers handed in nearly 39 million resignations, the highest number since tracking began in 2000.</p> <p>Some want better jobs. Others, a better work-life balance. Still others want a complete break from the corporate grind. Almost two years into the pandemic that left millions doing their jobs from home, many Americans are rethinking their relationship with work.</p> <p>Companies are struggling to stop employees from leaving and to boost morale. Some are trying mandatory companywide vacation days and blackout hours when meetings are banned. Executives are experimenting with new ways of working, including four-day workweeks and asynchronous schedules that allow people to set their own hours.</p> <p>Employers say burnout, long an issue for American workers and exacerbated by the pandemic, is a prime cause. A September survey by think tank the Conference Board found that more than three-quarters of 1,800 U.S. workers cited concerns such as stress and burnout as big challenges to well-being at work, up from 55% six months earlier. Half said workload-related pressure was harming their mental health.</p>

Tom Larrow, a 45-year-old information-technology manager for a financial-services company in Brunswick, Ohio, spent more than a year juggling work while helping his two young sons attend school online. He lost his mother-in-law to Covid-19. His nerves, he said, were frayed.

In September, he said, he had a panic attack as he tried to give his diabetic son insulin and couldn't figure out the dosage. "I could not, in my head, divide 50 by 25," he recalled. "I had to pull out a calculator and do that very, very basic math because my brain was so fried."

Mr. Larrow's employer has provided sessions on stress management, he said, which included recommendations to take five-minute breaks and meditate.

Chronic overwork already was rampant before the pandemic, said Alastair Simpson, vice president of design at software company [Dropbox](#) Inc. "We equated busy with good, or a badge of honor," he said.

Over the past two decades, the length of the average American workday has increased by 1.4 hours, according to polling by Gallup Inc. For millions of Americans, as commutes disappeared and schedules grew more irregular, the pandemic lengthened days still further. In a survey this year, 16% of U.S. workers said they put in more than 60 hours a week, up from 12% in 2011.

As companies increased their use of collaboration software such as Slack and [Microsoft](#) Teams, employees were inundated with pings and chat requests. Between February 2020 and February 2021, time spent in Teams meetings more than doubled, and it has continued to climb, Microsoft data show. Half of people on Teams respond to chats in five minutes or less, Microsoft said, while in the past year after-hours emails rose 10%. Between February 2020 and November of this year, the number of messages sent using Slack grew by 62%, the company said.

Gallup polling show stress and anxiety levels increased during the Covid era for workers of all stripes. In 2019, 48% of Americans said they experienced a lot of stress the previous day, according to Gallup. By December 2020, that figure was 51% for on-site workers and 59% for remote workers. Burned-out employees are 63% more likely to take a sick day, and nearly three times as likely to be actively seeking a different job, Gallup research showed.

Dropbox has been trying to minimize burnout by giving workers more control. In the fall of 2020, it decided to make some pandemic-era changes permanent, including allowing its 2,000 employees to work full-time from home and to have more control over when they do it—so long as they put in their hours and are available during certain periods.

So-called asynchronous work in theory means morning people and night owls can work when they feel most productive. Mr. Simpson, the design executive, said that on Mondays and Fridays, he stops working at 3 p.m. to spend time with his children, then logs back in after 7 p.m. Employees convene at the office, but only for events or when in-person collaboration is required, he said.

Dropbox considered a hybrid model of in-person and remote work, which many companies are embracing, but there were too many pitfalls, Mr. Simpson said. Among the concerns: a potentially uneven playing field where pay and promotions could go to workers who get the most face time with managers.

Many managers hoped that a combination of remote work and flexible schedules would yield happier employees, but work-from-home days often became stacked with video calls, leaving individual work to be tackled outside regular business hours.

"It is not simply the long hours taking a toll," [Citigroup](#) Inc. CEO Jane Fraser wrote this fall in a companywide memo. "It is the density of the day. Bouncing from one Zoom to the next. Barely a minute to catch your breath. To reflect, digest, or prepare for what's next."

Earlier this year, Citigroup broke ranks with other major U.S. banks, including JPMorgan Chase & Co. and [Goldman Sachs Group](#) Inc., to offer more flexible work options in an industry [known for long hours](#).

Goldman recently announced that employees with at least 15 years of service will be able to take up to a six-week [unpaid sabbatical](#). Citigroup encouraged employees to avoid scheduling calls and meetings between noon and 1 p.m., and asked them to shorten hourlong meetings to 45 minutes.

The World Health Organization defines burnout as feelings of exhaustion and reduced effectiveness resulting from chronic workplace stress. Burnout had been mounting since before the pandemic. The percentage of American workers describing themselves as very often or always burned rose from 23% in 2016 to 28% in 2019, where it remains today, according to Gallup surveys. By March 2020, though, rates of stress and worry among workers spiked to 60% and 58%, respectively, up from 46% and 38% before Covid, the surveys show.

Before the pandemic, 60% of employees said they thought mental health was something they should handle without employer assistance, according to surveys from insurer [MetLife](#) Inc. By this June, that figure had flipped, with 62% saying they believed their employer had a responsibility for their mental well-being.

Sara McElroy, who was a chief marketing officer in Atlanta, said she experienced stress-related health problems earlier this year that her doctor attributed to stress, including stomach issues and shingles. The 36-year-old self-described serial overachiever said she was under enormous pressure at work and worried that asking for help would make her look weak.

“I didn’t want to let anyone down,” she said. “I started feeling really depleted and, like, I wasn’t meeting the mark in pretty much anything I was doing.”

She quit in April and moved to Boca Raton, Fla., to start a new digital-marketing-director job—one with a slower pace. She said she has worked hard to enforce boundaries between life and work, including not logging on at night.

Some companies are considering whether to jettison the traditional workweek altogether. [Unilever](#) PLC, the London-based consumer-products company whose brands include Dove and Ben & Jerry’s, is running a trial in New Zealand on a four-day workweek, under which employees work 80% of their previous hours for the same pay.

In New York, crowdfunding company Kickstarter plans to launch a four-day week pilot program beginning next year. Chief executive Aziz Hasan said he hopes the new model will help employees feel more engaged, while offering more time for family and personal pursuits.

“I don’t think the four-day workweek is magical,” he said, adding that Covid has proved many workers can be productive outside traditional work arrangements. The past two years, he said, have shown how hungry people are for ways to strike a better work-life balance.

Getting the details right is critical, he said, because Kickstarter has to meet some demands in real-time, including from clients who need customer support. The four-day workweek experiment, he said, might require staggered scheduling, which could create communication problems. Mr. Hasan said the model might prove too hard to pull off across his 100-worker organization.

One tactic gaining traction is adding an all-company holiday—a sort of pencils-down day off for the entire company to allow workers to recharge. Enterprise-software company [SAP SE](#) shut down earlier this year for a companywide mental health day. It plans to let most employees work from the location of their choice on a permanent basis, with more flexible hours.

Ben Wigert, who directs workplace-management research for Gallup, said his research suggests the greatest determinant of worker burnout isn’t the number of hours worked, but factors such as unmanageable workloads, unclear communication and lack of manager support.

“If you take a vacation and come back to the same work circumstances, it doesn’t solve the problem. It might upset you more,” he said. “The next time, you might not come back.”

In June, dating app [Bumble](#) Inc. gave its 800 employees an entire week off for mental health—except for some employees who provide vital services such as information-technology security.

Bumble President Tariq Shaukat said the company plans to have two weeklong shutdowns next year, with special arrangements to not exclude employees providing vital services, and schedule two days a month free of email and Slack messaging so its employees can concentrate on tasks without interruptions.

Aerospace giant [Boeing](#) Co. has embraced the idea of meeting-free Fridays and flexible schedules for white-collar workers, but left it up to team managers whether to offer such options.

“They help reduce stress and create a more positive work environment, but they don’t always work for each person,” said Mike D’Ambrose, Boeing’s executive vice president of human resources.

Companies that are growing rapidly are especially susceptible to burnout from employees who feel overworked, said David Heath, chief executive of online sock brand Bombas LLC. Seventy-five of its nearly 200 employees were hired during the pandemic. “It’s this constant game of resource whack-a-mole,” he said.

Teams can start to exhibit signs of stress long before most people speak up about it, said Mr. Heath. He said he has one-on-one meetings to check in on each new hire. The company also trains its managers to regularly ask employees if they feel overworked.

In the spring and summer of 2020, as Covid-19 spread and there was social unrest in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, executives at many companies had town halls and listening sessions with employees. Gallup data showed that workers reported feeling more enthusiastic about and committed to their workplaces during that stretch. That summer, U.S. worker engagement levels as calculated by Gallup hit their highest level ever at 40% before later dropping back to 36%.

“Companies have been more understanding, flexible and empathetic” during the pandemic, said Gallup’s Mr. Wigert. Gallup’s research, he said, suggests that such efforts help cushion against higher rates of burnout.

At insurance and clinical-services company Humana Inc., Chief Executive Bruce Broussard began in March 2020 writing weekly dispatches to all associates. Managers were instructed to meet one-on-one with direct reports, and the company increased child-care and elder-care benefits. Internal employee engagement scores jumped five points, even as hours clocked by workers rose 15%, said Roger Cude, senior vice president of digital and community development.

Kristen Starr, until recently a consumer-demand analyst at a technology company in Austin, said her company was respectful of employee stress levels and family concerns when the pandemic hit, but that by this year, her workload, which had mounted amid supply-chain crunches and soaring demand, became too much.

Before the pandemic, the 46-year-old worked for seven years at her company and loved the job. This year, she said, she started to feel hopeless as her 8-to-5 workday gave way to a new normal of starting emails at 6:30 a.m. and work meetings at 7:30 a.m.

“It was like, I can’t get all this done. There’s no point in even trying,” she said. Ms. Starr quit in October and is looking for a new job.

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SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/unruly-passengers-will-lose-tsa-precheck-officials-say-11640098801?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>Airplane passengers who act up during flights could face a new consequence: losing PreCheck, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Transportation Security Administration said Tuesday.</p> <p>The FAA will provide the TSA with information about passengers who face fines for bad behavior, and those passengers could be removed from PreCheck eligibility under a new information-sharing partnership between the two agencies. The agreement is the government's latest effort to get a grip on a problem that has vexed airlines and regulators all year.</p> <p>While it is unclear how many offenders use PreCheck, a trusted-traveler program that allows fliers to avoid certain security-screening nuisances and wait in shorter lines, officials are hoping the additional consequence will have an impact. PreCheck eligibility is reserved for "low-risk travelers," the agencies said.</p> <p>"If you act out of line, you will wait in line," FAA Administrator Steve Dickson said. TSA will also share information with the FAA to help identify and locate unruly passengers to serve them with penalty notices, the agencies said.</p> <p>The FAA has initiated 315 enforcement cases against passengers this year for behavior ranging from verbal threats to physical assault on other passengers and crew. There have been 5,664 reports of unruly passengers this year as of Dec. 14 according to the FAA, and 1,030 investigations have been initiated. In 2019, the FAA initiated fewer than 150 investigations into passenger behavior.</p> <p>Rates of such incidents have fallen since the start of the year but have remained elevated compared with previous years, according to FAA figures.</p> <p>Many of the incidents involve disputes over masks, which are federally mandated on planes and in airports. Alcohol also plays a big role, the FAA and flight attendants say.</p> <p>FAA regulations already prohibit passengers on flights from consuming alcohol that isn't served by airlines. This summer, the FAA asked airports to ease up on sales of to-go alcoholic drinks. Some airlines have been holding off on selling alcohol in coach cabins to avoid contributing to problems.</p> <p>The FAA has proposed hefty fines for those who act out, but many of those who have incurred them have been able to show they don't have financial assets to pay the full amounts. The FAA also can't prosecute criminal cases, though it has started referring the most egregious cases to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.</p> <p>"This partnership with FAA will help ensure the safety and security of all passengers and hold those who violate federal regulations accountable for their actions," said TSA Administrator David Pekoske.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Experts: omicron surge despite new plan
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-will-surge-despite-bidens-new-plan-scientists-say
GIST	<p>Even as President Biden on Tuesday outlined new plans for battling the highly contagious Omicron variant, public health experts warned that the measures would not be sufficient to prevent a grim rise in infections and hospitalizations over the next few weeks.</p> <p>The administration's strategy includes doubling down on vaccination campaigns and propping up hospitals as they confront a large influx of patients. Federal officials will direct resources, including Army doctors, to support health care systems and distribute rapid tests to Americans.</p>

But Mr. Biden explicitly ruled out lockdowns and other harsh measures of the kind put in place as the pandemic first unfolded in early 2020. In interviews on Tuesday, some scientists argued that the variant's rapid spread requires more vigorous mitigation measures.

Some expressed frustration and alarm about what they described as a timid public health response, and bemoaned the apparent lack of will among politicians and society at large for more aggressive steps.

The crisis is brewing just as Americans prepare to travel to holiday gatherings, college students return home for vacation, and young and old converge for New Year's parties or set off on trips that may further spread the virus.

Federal health officials asked health care providers on Monday to advise their patients to conduct rapid home tests for Covid before holiday gatherings, and ask their guests to do the same. But while the tests are sold over the counter, prices start at \$14 for a two-pack, and many stores are sold out.

And in sharp contrast with the advice given out last year, Mr. Biden encouraged people to gather and celebrate the holidays, so long as they were vaccinated and took standard precautions.

At the same time, he warned that the variant was spreading at unprecedented speed, and said there would be Omicron infections among the vaccinated, apparently resigned to the fact that even those who have received boosters may get infected with the highly contagious variant.

"I still can't quite wrap my head around how quickly this is moving," said Joseph Fauver, a genomic epidemiologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. "I think it's going to be really bad. I don't know how else to put it."

It is not yet clear whether the variant causes milder illness than earlier variants. But there is a concern among some scientists that the notion has gained wide circulation and that the pandemic-weary public has let down its guard.

"This is an incredibly contagious pathogen, and we don't know yet its impact on severity and death," said Galit Alter, an immunologist and virologist affiliated with the Ragon Institute of Massachusetts General Hospital, M.I.T. and Harvard.

"We have to reestablish the importance and rigor of the first wave," she added. "We are back in 'flatten the curve' mode."

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HEADLINE	12/21 New plan: help hospitals, expand testing
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#biden-steps-up-the-us-pandemic-response-with-help-for-hospitals-and-expanded-testing
GIST	<p>President Biden accelerated his administration's coronavirus response on Tuesday as the country faced a surge in cases from a highly contagious new variant, telling anxious Americans that "we should all be concerned about Omicron, but not panicked."</p> <p>In a White House address delivered against the backdrop of a new global struggle to cope with the two-year-old pandemic, Mr. Biden said the government will buy a half-billion rapid coronavirus tests and distribute them free to Americans; create new vaccination and testing sites; and send 1,000 military medical professionals to help hospitals nationwide.</p> <p>"I know you're tired, really, and I know you're frustrated," Mr. Biden said, adding that vaccinated Americans should feel comfortable celebrating with their friends and family for the upcoming holidays. "We all want this to be over, but we're still in it."</p>

	<p>The president said military troops will begin arriving in Wisconsin and Indiana this week to aid health care workers at hospitals. He said the first of the new testing sites will open in New York within days. And he promised to use the Defense Production Act to help manufacturers better meet the demand for testing.</p> <p>Mr. Biden acknowledged the political division in the country and the fierce opposition to vaccine requirements among some people, saying his administration has put some mandates in place “not to control your life, but to save your life and the lives of others.” And he pleaded with Americans who remained unvaccinated to get shots to protect themselves and the people around them from infection.</p> <p>Some of Mr. Biden’s announcements — including the distribution of new at-home tests — are not intended to be implemented for weeks, if not longer, raising doubts about how much they will help in the short term. And most are incremental steps that many public health experts say fall far short of the kind of aggressive actions required.</p> <p>The president is not moving to mandate testing or vaccination for travelers on domestic flights, and he flatly ruled out on Tuesday returning to the kinds of restrictions that some European nations have once again imposed in an effort to slow the spread of the new variant, which doctors say is even more highly contagious than previous iterations of the virus.</p> <p>“That’s what I keep getting asked,” Mr. Biden said. “The answer is absolutely no. No.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Israel to administer fourth dose of vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/21/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#vaccine-booster-israel-covid
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM — Israeli officials said Tuesday that the country will administer a fourth dose of the Covid-19 vaccine, in a bid to curb the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Israel is believed to be the first country to offer a fourth round of doses.</p> <p>Naftali Bennett, the Israeli prime minister, said medical teams would begin to give fourth doses to those over 60, as well as to medical personnel, in a decision he hailed as “wonderful news that will assist us in getting through the Omicron wave that is engulfing the world.”</p> <p>Mr. Bennett added: “The State of Israel is continuing to stand at the forefront of the global effort to deal with the pandemic.”</p> <p>In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced in October that some adults with compromised immune systems would be eligible for a fourth shot of the mRNA vaccines made by Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech. Pfizer’s chief executive, Albert Bourla, said this month that fourth doses of his company’s vaccine may soon be needed to deal with the Omicron variant, but Dr. Anthony Fauci, the federal government’s top infectious disease expert, has disagreed.</p> <p>In Israel, at least one person has been confirmed to have died from the Omicron variant — an elderly man who had received two vaccine doses, but not a third one, health officials said Tuesday. The number of Omicron cases doubled on Tuesday to 340, the health ministry said, while the total number of coronavirus cases rose to 1,306 — the highest daily figure in nearly two months, but still proportionally lower than many developed countries.</p> <p>Israel was an early trailblazer in its efforts to administer a first vaccine to citizens late last year, initially rolling out a first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine far faster than most other countries. It was subsequently also one of the first countries to return society to a semblance of normality. After succeeding Benjamin Netanyahu in June, Mr. Bennett was among the first world leaders to permit the administering of a third dose of the vaccine last summer.</p>

	<p>Mr. Bennett also allowed for the vaccination of young children aged five and up, and held a “war game” in November in which the government tested out possible state responses to a hypothetical new virus variant. Attempting to slow the rise of Omicron in Israel, Mr. Bennett also recently enforced more stringent entry requirements for incoming travelers, banning the entry of all foreigners without a special exemption, and barring Israelis from traveling without special permission to 58 countries, including the United States, Canada and Britain.</p> <p>Mr. Bennett has said Israel is at the beginning of a fifth virus wave, and has called on citizens to vaccinate themselves and their children, to work from home and to increase their wearing of masks.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Recall expands: ham, pepperoni products
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/safeway-whole-foods-recalled-pork-listeria/
GIST	<p>Roughly 2.3 million pounds of fully cooked ham and pepperoni products possibly tainted by listeria and recently recalled were sold at more than 500 retail locations across the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.</p> <p>Albertsons, Big Y, Piggly Wiggly, Safeway, ShopRite and Whole Foods are among the grocers who received one of 27 products recently recalled by Alexander & Hornung, the St. Clair Shores, Michigan-based unit of Perdue Premium Meat Co., according to a list released on Friday by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service.</p> <p>The recall includes products bearing the establishment number "EST. M10125" inside the USDA mark of inspection.</p> <p>The numerous meat brands being recalled include Alexander & Hornung, Amish Valley, Big Y, Butcher Boy, Five Star, Food Club, Garrett Valley Farms, Lancaster, Niman Ranch, Open Nature and Wellshire Wood.</p> <p>The USDA also released photos of the Alexander & Hornung branded and private-label products in question.</p> <p>The recall was initiated earlier this month after product sampling detected listeria, a bacteria that can cause serious infection and strikes about 1,600 Americans a year, killing about 260 of them. The infection is most likely to sicken pregnant women, newborns, adults ages 65 or older, and people with weakened immune systems, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Symptoms include fever, muscle aches, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance and convulsions, sometimes preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. The infection is treated with antibiotics.</p> <p>The recalled products were produced on various dates and the USDA said some may still be in people's refrigerators or freezers.</p> <p>Consumers with questions can call (866) 866-3703 Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern time.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 Putin warns: 'retaliatory military-technical'
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-war-news-us-putin-warns-retaliatory-military-technical-measures/
GIST	<p><i>Moscow</i> — President Vladimir Putin used some of his most direct language to date on Tuesday in his escalating standoff with the U.S. and its European allies. The Russian leader warned that if the U.S. and NATO do not halt what Moscow considers aggressive actions along the country's border with Ukraine, Russia would respond in a "retaliatory military" manner.</p>

"If the obviously aggressive line of our Western colleagues continues, we will take adequate, retaliatory military-technical measures [and] react toughly to unfriendly steps," Putin told senior military officials during a meeting in remarks carried by Russian state TV. "I want to emphasize that we have every right to do so."

Putin had previously spoken of his "red lines" on Ukraine — first and foremost his demand that the U.S. block Ukraine's bid to become a NATO member. He had accused the West of crossing his red lines already, but the stern warning in Tuesday's speech marked the first time he had personally warned of [potential military action](#).

"They are doing whatever they want. But what they are doing now on the territory of Ukraine, or trying and planning to do, it is not a thousand kilometers from our national border, it is at our doorstep," Putin said, lamenting that Russia had "nowhere to retreat."

Speaking to CBS "[Face the Nation](#)" moderator Margaret Brennan on Monday, Vice President Kamala Harris reiterated the Biden administration's support for Ukraine and warned that the U.S. and its allies were prepared to respond to [any Russian incursion](#) with harsh sanctions. The Biden administration has not ruled anything out in the standoff, but has not thus far said explicitly what level of assistance Ukraine could expect from Washington if Putin does attack.

U.S. officials say they believe Putin has not yet made up his mind about whether to do that.

"We are very clear that Russia should not invade the sovereignty of Ukraine, that we must stand up — and we are standing up — for its territorial integrity," Harris told Brennan. "We are working with our allies in that regard, and we've been very clear that we are prepared to issue sanctions like you've not seen before."

The vice president declined to say whether any new sanctions would target Putin directly, but noted that the administration and U.S. allies were in "direct conversations" with the Kremlin, and making their concerns and their own red lines well understood.

Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Dr. Karen Donfried, meanwhile, told reporters in a telephone briefing from Brussels on Tuesday morning that the U.S. was prepared to engage diplomatically through "multiple channels," including bilateral engagement with Russia, through NATO talks with Moscow and through other regional blocs.

Donfried said bilateral engagement between the U.S. and Russia was likely to take place "in January," but offered no further detail on where or between whom.

U.S. intelligence agencies raised the alarm weeks ago over [Russia's massing of troops](#) near its border with Ukraine, spurring fear in Western capitals of a potential repeat of Putin's 2014 invasion, which saw him [annex the Crimean Peninsula](#) away from the smaller neighboring nation.

American officials say Russia has massed about 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border, but Moscow rejects all claims that it's preparing for an attack as "fake news."

Last week, Russia sent a formal, [sweeping list of demands](#) to the U.S., including that NATO cease its eastward expansion and reject any former Soviet country's bid for membership, including Ukraine. Many analysts said the proposals were essentially a non-starter, and the White House has made it clear that membership in the transatlantic defense alliance is for applying nations and current members to decide, not Russia.

Following Putin's recent video call with President Biden, the countries appointed working teams to meet and seek a way to ease the tension.

	<p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that the relevant contacts were taking place and the U.S. had expressed "readiness" to engage in a dialogue with Russia. But Putin on Tuesday stressed that he would only accept "long-term, legally binding guarantees" from the U.S.</p> <p>"You and I know well that even they, legal guarantees, cannot be trusted, because the U.S. easily withdraws from all international agreements it loses interest in for one reason or another while explaining it somehow or giving no explanations whatsoever," Putin said. "Yet we need at least something, some legally binding agreements, not just verbal assurances. We know well the value of such assurances, words, and promises."</p> <p>Speaking at the same meeting, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said the U.S. had "deployed some 8,000 troops" near Russian borders and, along with NATO allies, held frequent exercises within the vicinity of Russia using strategic bomber aircraft. He also shared plans for the Russian Armed Forces to grow by nearly 15,000 regular forces and hold two largescale exercises next year.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Calif. requires booster healthcare workers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/california-health-care-workers-booster-shots-81887732
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- California health care workers will be required to have coronavirus booster shots to ensure that hospitals are ready to deal with a surge in cases as the more-transmissible omicron variant spreads throughout the state.</p> <p>Gov. Gavin Newsom announced the order Tuesday on his personal Twitter account and planned to provide more details at a Wednesday news conference.</p> <p>California already requires health care workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus, a directive that took effect in September and has since led to the firing or suspension of thousands of people. Now it will join New Mexico as at least the second state to require booster shots for health care workers.</p> <p>Last week, Newsom, who imposed the first statewide shutdown order in March 2020, warned that cases would likely rise and re-imposed a rule requiring everyone to wear masks at public indoor gatherings.</p> <p>Concerns stem from the rise of omicron, which as of Monday was the dominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States. Areas in the Midwest and Northeast are seeing the biggest jump in cases and hospitalizations amid frigid temperatures that have kept people indoors.</p> <p>Much about the variant remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Scientists say omicron spreads more easily than other coronavirus strains, including delta. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a third shot for the best chance at preventing infection but even without the extra dose, vaccination still should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.</p> <p>California has so far fared far better than many other states. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists California as a place with "high" transmission of the virus, along with nearly everywhere else in the country. But in the last week California averaged 114 new cases per 100,000 people, less than half the national rate.</p> <p>While 70% of Californians have been fully vaccinated, that still leaves 30% — or roughly 12 million people — who haven't been. The California Department of Public Health says people who are not vaccinated are seven times more likely to get infected, nearly 13 times more likely to be hospitalized and nearly 16 times more likely to die from the coronavirus.</p> <p>Coronavirus related hospitalizations have been rising slowly in California, up 15% in the last 11 days to 3,852. That's less than half as many as during the late summer peak and one-fifth of a year ago, before vaccines were widely available.</p>

	But while hospitals overall have fewer patients than last winter, many have fewer workers to treat the patients they do have. The staffing shortage comes as businesses are having trouble finding workers, including hospitals. A recent study by the University of California-San Francisco estimated the state's nursing shortage could persist until 2026.
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HEADLINE	12/21 Breakthrough cases become more common
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/breakthrough-covid-19-infections-deaths-rose-delta-outpaced/story?id=81822930
GIST	<p>As Americans brace for the possibility of another difficult winter ahead in the nation's fight against coronavirus, there is a renewed sense of urgency to get as many people inoculated and boosted as quickly as possible, given the emergence of the highly contagious omicron variant -- now dominant in the U.S.</p> <p>An ABC News analysis of federal and state data found that since July, there has been an acceleration of the number of breakthrough coronavirus cases, thus, of individuals who test positive after being fully vaccinated.</p> <p>While federal data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is incomplete, only accounting for a subset of states, the analysis found that between April and November, more than 16,700 vaccinated people had died -- the vast majority since the start of the delta variant's surge, earlier this summer. Similarly, nearly all -- approximately 96% -- of the 1.8 million breakthrough cases -- have come during the same time period.</p> <p>Comparatively, in those select states, at least 5.8 million unvaccinated Americans had tested positive, and just under 64,000 unvaccinated Americans had died, during the same time period.</p> <p>Despite the increase in coronavirus infections among vaccinated people, experts say vaccines are holding strong in their ability to dramatically reduce the risk of severe illness.</p> <p>"Just because you have a breakthrough infection doesn't mean the vaccine does not work and isn't giving you huge benefit," Dr. Justin Lessler, professor of epidemiology at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told ABC News.</p> <p>The analysis of state data reveals that the percentages of fully vaccinated individuals testing positive, requiring hospitalization, or dying of coronavirus remain quite low when compared to the percentage of unvaccinated Americans experiencing severe illness because of the virus. Since the rollout began last winter, only a small fraction of fully vaccinated people in the United States have experienced a breakthrough infection, and an even smaller percentage have been hospitalized or died.</p> <p>"I think if you look at the data, it's clear the vaccine is working," Lessler said.</p> <p>Breakthrough infections captured by the available data have been predominantly still associated with the delta variant. However, as concerns grow over the potential impact of the omicron variant, preliminary data suggests the new variant may be more likely to cause infections among vaccinated people.</p> <p>Breakthrough cases becoming more common, data shows</p> <p>Many vaccines lose their power over time and are not nearly as effective even initially as the COVID-19 vaccines. The tetanus vaccine, for example, requires a booster shot every 10 years. Other vaccines, like the flu shot -- which, according to the CDC, reduces the risk of flu illness by between 40% and 60% among the overall population -- are needed on a yearly basis.</p> <p>When the COVID-19 vaccines were first launched last December, experts did not know how long their protection would last and how the evolution of the virus might impact vaccine efficacy. At the time, Pfizer and Moderna both estimated that their vaccines were more than 90% effective.</p>

By late May, several weeks after the vaccine program became open to the general adult population in mid-April, about half of Americans had been fully vaccinated against COVID-19. But in the summer and fall, as the highly-transmissible delta variant became dominant, the nation began experiencing a marked increase in infections, including among vaccinated people, as the efficacy of the vaccines began to wane.

“We do have some evidence of vaccine effectiveness waning a bit,” Ellie Murray, an assistant professor of epidemiology at Boston University School of Public Health, told ABC News. “Vaccinated people start to have a higher chance of being infected than they did closer to the date of their vaccine.”

However, reporting from health officials and data revealed that infections in inoculated individuals tended not to be severe, thanks to underlying protection from the vaccines against acute illness.

CDC data, sourced from more than two dozen states, shows that between April and June, a total of 77,000 breakthrough cases and 1,500 breakthrough deaths were recorded, compared to more than 1.74 million breakthrough cases and 15,000 deaths recorded between July and the first week of November. It is unclear exactly how many of these people had also been boosted.

The federal data was pulled from 27 states, which regularly link their case surveillance and immunization information.

State-level data for breakthrough COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths is not publicly available in every state. But data obtained by ABC News from 41 states -- which extends to December -- echoes findings from federal data that even though the acceleration trend in breakthrough infections has continued over the last two months, the percent of fully vaccinated Americans who have experienced a breakthrough case remains low.

“An important thing to think about with breakthrough infections is not simply the number of [breakthrough cases], but what percentage of people who are vaccinated are having breakthrough infections and whether that percentage is changing in a meaningful way,” Murray explained.

Like the federally compiled data, state-level data from January to December also shows that infections among vaccinated people were still relatively uncommon. Meanwhile, it remains exceedingly rare for a vaccinated person to die of COVID-19.

Data for breakthrough infections, cases, and hospitalizations varies greatly by state. Some states provide data for all three variables, while others only offer statistics for one or two variables.

Data from 36 of the states showed that approximately 1.37% of those fully vaccinated have experienced a breakthrough infection between January and December. Similarly, data from 34 of the states showed that about 0.05% of those fully vaccinated Americans have experienced a breakthrough case that required hospitalization, and data from 36 states showed only 0.01% of those fully vaccinated have died of COVID-19.

In October, unvaccinated individuals had a 5 times greater risk of testing positive for COVID-19 and a 14 times greater risk of dying from it, as compared to fully vaccinated individuals, according to data compiled by the CDC. Additionally, unvaccinated individuals had a 10 times greater risk of testing positive for COVID-19 and a 20 times greater risk of dying from it, as compared to fully vaccinated individuals with a booster.

Breakthroughs do not mean vaccines are not working, experts say

With more people getting vaccinated, and protection declining over time since the initial vaccination series, breakthrough cases are to be expected, experts concurred.

“With waning immunity, new variants and increased population mobility, it’s no surprise that we are seeing a surge in breakthrough cases. While breakthrough cases will be for the most part mild or even

asymptomatic, any new case only furthers community transmission and prolongs the pandemics,” said John Brownstein, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at Boston Children's Hospital and an ABC News contributor.

Although vaccines remain overall, “very, very effective,” and “extremely effective” against hospitalization and death, there does indeed appear to be a decline in protection against infection, over time, Lessler explained.

“Even if we're seeing a lot of breakthrough infections, those people are going to be less likely to end up in the hospital clinic compared to somebody who is [unvaccinated],” Lessler added.

Murray and Lessler both likened the COVID-19 vaccine to a seatbelt, explaining that even if an individual were to get into a car accident, the seatbelt can often, but not always, help prevent significant injury or death.

“Breakthrough infections are not evidence that vaccines don't work anymore than the fact that car crashes [that] are still sometimes fatal is evidence that seatbelts don't work. We use prevention tools because they help reduce our risk of serious disease or death, not because they are guaranteed to 100% always keep us safe,” Murray said. “If we held to that latter standard, we'd never use any preventive measures because nothing is perfect, and the result would be much more death and disease and disability.”

According to data from Peterson-Kaiser Family Foundation's Health System Tracker, from June to September, the large majority of breakthrough hospitalizations affected older Americans, as well as those with comorbidities. Further, their average stay at the hospital was shorter than those who were unvaccinated.

The unknown of omicron

Over the last three weeks, concerns over omicron have rapidly traversed the globe. Data from the CDC shows that in the U.S., the presence of the omicron variant, now the dominant variant domestically, has increased by 70% over the last two weeks.

“With omicron displaying increased transmissibility, breakthrough cases will unfortunately become even more normalized,” Brownstein said.

Experts concurred that although much is still unknown about the omicron variant, it could also potentially cause more breakthroughs than past variants.

“Omicron is going to be more than a major player. It is going to be the main story,” Lessler said, adding that the U.S. may see a significant wave of infections, which could cause significant systemic challenges for hospitals.

Preliminary data suggests that omicron not only spreads at a rate two to three times faster than the delta variant, but also, may be more likely to cause infections among vaccinated people. Despite this, vaccines and additional booster shot protection still appears to dramatically reduce the risk of severe illness.

Ultimately, personal responsibility will play a major role in preventing additional spread, experts agreed.

Boosters and vaccines remain the key to slowing the spread of the infections, and ultimately to turning the pandemic around, particularly when combined with social distancing, masking and other preventative measures, according to the CDC.

“We have the right tools to limit breakthrough cases. Testing before traveling or attending a gathering can help prevent risk to both vaccinated and unvaccinated people. Similarly, boosters when eligible can dramatically reduce the risk of transmission,” Brownstein said.

The CDC currently recommends that everyone ages 16 and older receive a booster shot six months after their Pfizer or Moderna vaccines or two months after the Johnson & Johnson shot.

HEADLINE	12/21 Report: life expectancy fell by 2yrs in 2020
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/us-life-expectancy-declined-2020-due-covid-report/story?id=81862300
GIST	<p>Life expectancy in the United States decreased by nearly two years in 2020, mainly because of the pandemic, a new federal report suggests.</p> <p>In 2019, Americans had a life expectancy -- the average number of years a person is expected to live -- of 78.8 years. But new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) found this figure fell to 77.0 years in 2020, marking the biggest drop seen since World War II.</p> <p>"The thing that stands out to me is just this staggering decline," Dr. Robert Anderson, chief of mortality statistics at the NCHS, told ABC News. "I know 1.8 years doesn't seem like a whole lot but, on a population scale, that's a huge decline in life expectancy."</p> <p>This is the biggest decrease seen since World War II, when life expectancy fell by 2.9 years from 66.2 years in 1942 to 63.3 years in 1943.</p> <p>Although the report lays bare the impact that the virus has had on life expectancy, the team behind the report said other factors also played a role, including an increase in deaths due to diabetes and accidental injuries, such as drug overdoses.</p> <p>Diabetes deaths topped 100,000 for the first time, Anderson said, and accidental or unintentional injury deaths, such as drug overdoses, topped 200,000.</p> <p>However, he said that COVID-19 is undoubtedly the biggest reason for the decline.</p> <p>According to the report, there were more than 3.38 million deaths in the U.S. last year, about 530,000 more than there were in 2019.</p> <p>Of that 3.38 million, more than 350,000 deaths were attributed to COVID-19, meaning 10.4% of all deaths in 2020 were caused by the virus.</p> <p>"I can tell you it's the primary driver in the decline in life expectancy and the increase in mortality," Anderson said. "We're talking about 350,000 deaths. That accounts for the bulk of the increase in mortality -- the overwhelming majority."</p> <p>Men saw a bigger decrease in life expectancy, losing 2.1 years -- from 76.3 in 2019 to 74.2 in 2020 -- compared to a decline of 1.5 years -- from 81.4 in 2019 to 79.9 in 2020 -- for women.</p> <p>COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in 2020, responsible for 85 deaths per 100,000 people.</p> <p>Anderson said it is the first time a new disease has entered the top 10 leading causes of death so quickly.</p> <p>"A disease that comes out of nowhere and ends up in the top 10 or top five? You'd have to go back to the early days of the HIV epidemic to see something similar."</p> <p>He said HIV never got higher than the eighth-leading cause of death and, even then, it took a few years after the virus was first identified before it reached the top 10.</p> <p>"This is sort of similar, but even more dramatic, because in one year it goes from nothing to the third-leading cause of death," Anderson added. "Remarkable."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Rapid at-home Covid tests
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/rapid-covid-home-tests-white-house-prepares-mail/story?id=81875571
GIST	<p>President Joe Biden plans to announce on Tuesday that his administration will distribute 500 million free at-home rapid tests to Americans beginning in January to combat the surging omicron variant.</p> <p>Americans will be able to request the tests through a website that will launch next month and they will be delivered by mail.</p> <p>ABC News spoke with two infectious disease experts about the difference between lab tests and rapid tests and how they work.</p> <p>Rapid at-home tests are also known as antigen tests. They look for antigens, or proteins from the coronavirus.</p> <p>This is different from polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, which are considered the "gold standard" when it comes to COVID-19 testing. They look for genetic material from the virus.</p> <p>"They're really sensitive, meaning they can detect really low levels of the virus in a patient's sample," Dr. Matthew Binnicker, director of the Clinical Virology Laboratory at the Mayo Clinic, told ABC News about PCR tests. "They are not going to give a false positive if a patient has a different infection or no infection at all."</p> <p>PCR tests are considered to be very accurate, but they have a longer turnaround time because they have to be sent to a laboratory and be analyzed by a medical professional. In the early days of the pandemic, some patients reported that they were waiting a week or longer for their results to return. This makes them impractical for use in widespread surveillance.</p> <p>By comparison, rapid tests are not as sensitive, meaning it's possible for patients who are actually infected with COVID-19 to receive a negative result.</p> <p>"They can be negative even if someone is infected. This is the biggest concern early on when someone has been exposed," Binnicker said. "It takes some time for the virus to replicate and incubate. When performed too early, the test can be falsely negative."</p> <p>Dr. Stuart Ray, a professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University, said this presents a challenge when it comes to the omicron variant.</p> <p>"Levels of the virus may not be very high, so the result is negative, but the person is becoming more infectious," he told ABC News.</p> <p>He added that temperature is important for rapid tests to work and when below certain temperatures -- about 50 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit -- the tests will not work.</p> <p>"If you're thinking about a gathering where you'd like to test everyone before they go in to see grandma and grandpa, you might think you'd like to have them stand out on the porch and then do the test. Well, depending on the temperature, that may not work," Ray said.</p> <p>However, results for rapid tests can be returned in as little as 15 minutes, making them beneficial for screening in schools, airports and other public venues.</p> <p>If a person is going to an event, the doctors recommend getting tested right before. If the result is negative, they say it does not mean the person is definitely not infected but that the virus has not been detected.</p> <p>If a test is positive, they suggest getting a laboratory test to confirm the infection.</p>

	<p>Doctors said the Biden administration's plan to administer free tests is a big step in helping combat the pandemic, but more information is needed.</p> <p>For example, experts said it's unclear how many tests will be available per household and half a billion tests is a big number but will only go so far.</p> <p>"One consideration is that you can set off sensitivity of the test by performing the test more frequently," Binnicker said.</p> <p>"By performing the test on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, for example, you enhance your chances of picking up the infection. But that adds up to multiple tests."</p> <p>Ray added, "It's a great start, but will not meet the needs of the population. We just have so many Americans and frequent testing is needed to really manage risk."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 South Africa cases drop; omicron peaked?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/south-africas-case-drop-show-omicron-peak-passed-81888933
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG -- South Africa's noticeable drop in new COVID-19 cases in recent days may signal that the country's dramatic omicron-driven surge has passed its peak, medical experts say.</p> <p>Daily virus case counts are notoriously unreliable, as they can be affected by uneven testing, reporting delays and other fluctuations. But they are offering one tantalizing hint — far from conclusive yet — that omicron infections may recede quickly after a ferocious spike.</p> <p>South Africa has been at the forefront of the omicron wave and the world is watching for any signs of how it may play out there to try to understand what may be in store.</p> <p>After hitting a high of nearly 27,000 new cases nationwide on Thursday, the numbers dropped to about 15,424 on Tuesday. In Gauteng province — South Africa's most populous with 16 million people, including the largest city, Johannesburg, and the capital, Pretoria — the decrease started earlier and has continued.</p> <p>"The drop in new cases nationally combined with the sustained drop in new cases seen here in Gauteng province, which for weeks has been the center of this wave, indicates that we are past the peak," Marta Nunes, senior researcher at the Vaccines and Infectious Diseases Analytics department of the University of Witwatersrand, told The Associated Press.</p> <p>"It was a short wave ... and the good news is that it was not very severe in terms of hospitalizations and deaths," she said. It is "not unexpected in epidemiology that a very steep increase, like what we saw in November, is followed by a steep decrease."</p> <p>Gauteng province saw its numbers start sharply rising in mid-November. Scientists doing genetic sequencing quickly identified the new, highly mutated omicron variant that was announced to the world on Nov. 25.</p> <p>Significantly more transmissible, omicron quickly achieved dominance in South Africa. An estimated 90% of COVID-19 cases in Gauteng province since mid-November have been omicron, according to tests.</p> <p>And the world seems to be quickly following, with omicron already surpassing the delta variant as the dominant coronavirus strain in some countries. In the U.S., omicron accounted for 73% of new infections last week, health officials said — and the variant is responsible for an estimated 90% or more of new infections in the New York area, the Southeast, the industrial Midwest and the Pacific Northwest.</p>

Confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.K. have surged by 60% in a week as omicron overtook delta as the dominant variant there. Worldwide, the variant has been detected in at least 89 countries, according to the World Health Organization.

In South Africa, experts worried that the sheer volume of new infections would overwhelm the country's hospitals, even though omicron appears to cause milder disease, with significantly less hospitalizations, patients needing oxygen and deaths.

But then cases in Gauteng started falling. After reaching 16,000 new infections on Dec. 12, the province's numbers have steadily dropped, to just over 3,300 cases Tuesday.

"It's significant. It's very significant," Dr. Fareed Abdullah said of the decrease.

"The rapid rise of new cases has been followed by a rapid fall and it appears we're seeing the beginning of the decline of this wave," said Abdullah, working in the COVID-19 ward at Pretoria's Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

In another sign that South Africa's omicron surge may be receding, a study of health care professionals who tested positive for COVID-19 at Chris Hani Baragwanath hospital in Soweto shows a rapid increase and then a quick decline in cases.

"Two weeks ago we were seeing more than 20 new cases per day and now it is about five or six cases per day," Nunes said.

But, she said, it is still very early and there are several factors that must be closely watched.

South Africa's positivity rate has remained high at 29%, up from just 2% in early November, indicating the virus is still circulating among the population at relatively high levels, she said.

And the country's holiday season is now underway, when many businesses close down for a month and people travel to visit family, often in rural areas. This could accelerate omicron's spread across South Africa and to neighboring countries, experts said.

"In terms of the massive everyday doubling that we were seeing just over a week ago with huge numbers, that seems to have settled," said Professor Veronica Uekermann, head of the COVID-19 response team at Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

"But it is way too early to suggest that we have passed the peak. There are too many external factors, including the movement during the holiday season and the general behavior during this period," she said, noting that infections spiked last year after the holiday break.

It's summertime in South Africa and many gatherings are outdoors, which may make a difference between the omicron-driven wave here and the surges in Europe and North America, where people tend to gather indoors.

Another unknown factor is how much omicron has spread among South Africans without causing disease.

Some health officials in New York have suggested that because South Africa appears to have experienced a quick, mild wave of omicron, the variant may behave similarly there and elsewhere in the U.S. But Nunes cautions against jumping to those conclusions.

"Each setting, each country is different. The populations are different. The demographics of the population, the immunity is different in different countries," she said. South Africa's population, with an average age of 27, is more youthful than many Western countries, for instance.

	<p>Most of the patients currently being treated for COVID-19 in hospitals are unvaccinated, Uekermann emphasized. About 40% of adult South Africans have been inoculated with two doses.</p> <p>“All my patients in ICU are unvaccinated,” Uekermann said. “So our vaccinated people are doing better in this wave, for sure. We have got some patients who are very ill with severe COVID, and these are unvaccinated patients.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Enticing people to move: live, work
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/states-towns-incentive-programs-entice-movers-country/story?id=81880789
GIST	<p>With on-site work in a state of flux due to the pandemic, small towns, big towns, regions and even states, have launched programs to incentivize people to move.</p> <p>Anela Malik and Ahmed Zuhairy have worked from their home in Washington, D.C., for over a year. They say that over the course of the pandemic, what they were looking for in a hometown, has changed.</p> <p>"Though we loved our apartments, our various apartments over the years, they were all really small. With two people and two cats that were now working from home, fighting for space on calls, and trying not to interrupt each other's Zooms," said Malik. "Our life shifted dramatically during the last year."</p> <p>Anela Malik is a social media influencer and her husband, Ahmed Zuhairy, is a financial crimes analyst. They said they were looking to find more space, a good community and a place that suited their other interests outside of work.</p> <p>"[My husband] really wants to be in a place with a great cycling infrastructure. We both really like nature," said Malik. "I was looking for a place that had a thriving or at least a growing food scene. When we started our Google searches, Northwest Arkansas came up every single time."</p> <p>The couple decided to take advantage of an incentive program in Northwest Arkansas called, "Life Works Here," that offered \$10,000 and a credit that can be used at any local shop that piques interest. The two were chosen for the program out of more than 35,000 applicants.</p> <p>"I filled out the application late at night on a whim and then we booked a trip here and right before we came, they notified us we were selected," said Zuhairy. "So that was on our minds when we visited, but I would say that, in my view, it was the people here that made up our minds for us."</p> <p>Malik and Zuhairy signed a lease in October for their new home in Lowell, Arkansas, a town with a population less than 10,000.</p> <p>The "Life Works Here" program was launched in November 2020 and only 64 applicants have been accepted, according to Nelson Peacock, the CEO and president of the Northwest Arkansas Council.</p> <p>"People are finding that they can come here, have an exciting employment opportunity, just live their life and excel here," said Peacock, who oversees the program. "And so I think that's what we're taking advantage of."</p> <p>Peacock said that the program focuses on accepting three different categories of professionals: remote workers, STEM workers and creative entrepreneurs.</p> <p>"We also want to bring in these entrepreneurs so they can build, grow, and scale their companies to help us with job growth in the future," said Peacock. "And then the creatives to help us build out a well-rounded quality of life here."</p> <p>Northwest Arkansas isn't the only place taking advantage of newfound remote-work flexibility and offering incentives to urge people to relocate.</p>

Tyler Jagers, a 41-year-old video game designer, moved from his home in San Jose, California, to Topeka, Kansas, in October 2020.

He said the high cost of housing in Silicon Valley was a wake-up call.

After applying to the "Choose Topeka" relocation incentive grant, Jagers was awarded \$10,000 and decided to trade in his small rented California apartments for a house that he owns.

"There would be almost 20 people living in the same house where people were renting couches," said Jagers. "For me, when I saw that, I was like, 'It's time to start investing in my own personal, long-term existence.'"

"Why would someone give you \$10,000 if they don't want you there, right?" he added.

Jagers bought a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home in Topeka for \$47,000.

"The real part of the move that was so exciting to me was the idea of home ownership," said Jagers.

In order to keep the awarded \$10,000, relocated residents have to stay in Topeka for a minimum of a year. It's been a little over a year since Jagers made the move, and he said he has no plans to leave anytime soon.

"I'm not planning on flipping this house, ever. I'm not planning on moving ever. It's the best living experience I've ever had in my life," said Jagers, who is almost finished renovating his new home and continues to work remotely for a video game company.

Jagers said that the pandemic forced him to rethink about what he values in a home.

"The pandemic years made me make the best decisions I've ever made and actually gave me that nudge to grow up in a sense," said Jagers.

Back in Arkansas, for Anela Malik and Ahmed Zuhairy it's still too early to tell whether or not the move was the best decision for them, but they said they're only optimistic.

"I think a lot of young people right now, especially, are thinking about leaving the bigger cities, because our work has changed so much, so our home lives also need to change to accommodate that," said Malik. She said one of the most important things to think about when thinking about relocating is to consider the community.

"I would say just make sure that you could imagine your life in that community and there are a lot of incentive programs out there," she said. "And that is an opportunity. But just make sure you could imagine your life in that place."

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HEADLINE	12/21 NOAA: percent chance for snowy Christmas
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/dreaming-white-christmas-chances-noaa/story?id=81862309
GIST	<p>Ahead of Christmas, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has released an interactive map that shows the average percent chance of seeing snow in towns across the country.</p> <p>NOAA defines the meaning of a "white Christmas" if there is at least 1 inch of snow on the ground by 7 a.m. Christmas morning.</p> <p>According to data collected by the NOAA over the course of 30 years, most large U.S. cities, from Boston to Chicago to Seattle, don't typically have much of a chance of seeing a white Christmas on average.</p>

Minneapolis-Saint Paul is the only large metropolitan area that has a likely chance, at 74%.

In the Northeast, Washington, D.C., normally has a 5% chance and New York City typically has a 13% chance of seeing a white Christmas on average.

Those out West have a bit more luck.

Aspen, Colorado, has almost a 100% chance of seeing a white Christmas and Breckenridge, Colorado, is not far behind with a 98% chance on average.

With the mild start to the winter season this year, the national snowfall average is behind across most of the U.S.

As of now, not much snow is expected east of the Rockies, where it is forecast to get warmer for most heading towards Christmas this year.

New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit and Denver are not expected to see a white Christmas this year.

However, most of the Rocky Mountains and all of the West Coast at higher elevations will see snow on the ground.

Similarly, in the Northeast, snow will be on the ground at higher elevations, especially from upstate New York to Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

The forecast this year calls for a white Christmas in most of North Dakota, the northern half of Minnesota, northern Wisconsin and most northern parts of Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/22 AWS experiencing issues for East coast
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/amazon-web-services-experiencing-issues-for-east-coast-users
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - It happened again.</p> <p>Amazon Web Services (AWS) is experiencing yet another round of issues, just a few weeks after service interruptions crippled internet services.</p> <p>AWS provides cloud computing services to government entities, universities and companies.</p> <p>The health dashboard provided through Amazon confirms it is seeing launch failures and networking connectivity issues for some. This appears to only impact the U.S. East Region, based out of north Virginia.</p> <p>"This is affecting availability and connectivity to EC2 instances that are part of the affected data center within the affected Availability Zone," the dashboard explains. "We are also experiencing elevated RunInstance API error rates for launches within the affected Availability Zone."</p> <p>The latest update just before 5:20 a.m. says power for most of the outages has been restored and customers should soon see it recovered.</p> <p>"While we would expect continued improvement over the coming hour, we would still recommend failing away from the Availability Zone if you are able to do so to mitigate this issue," the statement reads.</p>

HEADLINE	12/21 Beijing massive propaganda campaign
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/report-beijing-unleashed-a-massive-propaganda-campaign-to-redefine-democracy/
GIST	<p>China has unleashed a massive propaganda campaign aimed at recreating democracy in its own image, according to a new report published Tuesday.</p> <p>The effort included flooding social media outlets with thousands of posts, cartoons and memes, all of which questioned age-old assumptions about democracy, according to “China’s Narrative War on Democracy.” from Recorded Future, a cyber security firm. (The Record Media is an editorially independent arm of Recorded Future.)</p> <p>Among the campaign’s most popular offerings, it said: a drawing of the Statue of Liberty looking into the mirror asking “who is the most democratic of them all?” The next frame shows her shooting the mirror, suggesting that Lady Liberty didn’t like the answer.</p> <p>“What makes these cartoons dangerous is they aren’t all lies or exaggerations,” said Charity Wright, a threat intelligence analyst and author of the report. “Some of these weaknesses they point to are things the US is legitimately struggling with.”</p> <p>According to her research, the campaign began in earnest about a week before the Summit for Democracy hosted by President Joe Biden. The US pointedly didn’t invite China but included Taiwan on the guest list. China considers Taiwan a renegade province. The move clearly rankled leaders in the Beijing. Days after seeing the guest list, Beijing offered its own democratic message.</p> <p>Wright said her research found that the democracy narratives started at the top, with spokespeople from China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs starting the discussion and then state-sponsored social media outlets picking up the narrative from there. “This was the opposite of grassroots,” Wright said. “Bot-like accounts amplified the official line” in hopes of finding an audience among people who are either disillusioned by their own democracies or by America itself.</p> <p>“Recently, democracy is being widely discussed around the world,” Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng said during his introductory remarks at a live virtual panel discussion on democracy hosted on YouTube. “This should have been a good thing. But a very few countries are using democracy as a cover... They even take democracy as a political tour for selfish gains and build small blocks to create division and confrontation in the world. This obviously runs against the spirit of democracy.”</p> <p>Back in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping famously tried to redefine capitalism by calling China’s economic reform program “capitalism with Chinese characteristics.” Beijing’s new political equivalent has a less catchy name: they call it “whole-process people’s democracy.”</p> <p>“There is no fixed model of democracy; it manifests itself in many forms,” China’s top government body, the State Council, argued in a white paper entitled “China: Democracy That Works” released before the Biden democracy summit.</p> <p>China’s democracy, it said, has lifted 800 million Chinese out of extreme poverty; has built the world’s largest social security and healthcare system, and has created millions of jobs every year for the past 15 years. The list had the feel of an American re-election campaign.</p> <p>“China is exceptional at narrative warfare right now,” said Wright. “They understand how to craft messaging to a localized audience and appeal to their target audience through elements of shared identity, language, and culture. What they are trying to do is position audiences against the US and the West, and put Beijing in a more favorable light.”</p> <p>While the Recorded Future report didn’t track the effectiveness of the tactics, it did provide for the first time an idea of its breadth. There were nearly 8,500 mentions of “what is #democracy” in the two weeks</p>

between December 1 and December 16, the analysts found, which coincides with the days before, during, and after the Summit for Democracy.

“Their strategy was simple: consistent messaging, lots of posts and continuous chatter across a whole variety of online platforms,” Wright said, adding that China has focused on amplifying the message in countries that are taking part in Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, China’s big-money push to build ports, rail lines, and telecommunications networks around the world.

Before the latest campaign, Beijing’s media accounts referred to the word “democracy” a handful of times each day, the report said. As the opening of the Summit for Democracy neared, however, the mentions of democracy ballooned from 40 just before the summit to 166 mentions in a single day from the same accounts, it said. Mentions stayed at that level for almost a week with hashtags like “what kind of #democracy is this?” and “who defines #democracy.”

The campaign is reminiscent of the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union went toe-to-toe over the relative merits of their political systems.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Abcbot targets Chinese cloud providers
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/new-abcbot-botnet-goes-after-chinese-cloud-providers/
GIST	<p>Security researchers have spotted a new malware botnet that, over the past few months, has specifically targeted the infrastructure of Chinese cloud hosting providers.</p> <p>Named Abcbot, the botnet has targeted servers hosted by companies like Alibaba Cloud, Baidu, Tencent, and Huawei Cloud, Cado Security said in a report today, echoing previous findings from Trend Micro and Qihoo 360 Netlab.</p> <p>“My theory is that the newer CSPs such as Huawei Cloud, Tencent and Baidu are not as mature as something like AWS, which includes automatic alerting when a cloud instance is deployed in an insecure fashion,” Matt Muir of Cado Security told <i>The Record</i> in an email this week.</p> <p>“Alibaba Cloud certainly has been around longer so its security services are more mature, but it is noteworthy that after Trend Micro [initially] saw malware targeting Huawei Cloud, the new samples we analyzed are targeting additional Chinese cloud providers,” Muir added.</p> <p>Abcbot’s attacks typically target Linux servers hosted by these companies that are secured with weak passwords or are running unpatched applications.</p> <p>Once an initial entry point is found, Abcbot deploys a Linux bash script that disables SELinux security protections, creates a backdoor for the attacker, and then scans the infected hosts for signs of other malware botnets.</p> <p>If competing malware is found, Abcbot kills processes known to be associated with other botnets and processes related to crypto-mining operations.</p> <p>It then also takes another step not seen with other botnets by removing SSH keys and only leaving its own in place to guarantee that they’re the only ones that can connect.</p> <p>Muir said that this behavior suggests that other groups are using a similar technique, which the Abcbot developers have also picked up on and decided to block.</p> <p>“Alternatively, it could be that they’re removing their own keys from prior campaigns,” Muir also told us.</p> <p>Muir said that Abcbot samples analyzed by Cado researchers only contained functionality to corral infected systems as part of Abcbot’s botnet.</p>

	<p>However, previous samples analyzed by Trend Micro included modules for crypto-currency mining, and samples analyzed by Netlab included features for DDoS attacks.</p> <p>Taking into consideration the steps Abcbot took to kill crypto-mining processes it did not spawn itself; it may be that its final purpose is to generate cryptocurrency profits for the attackers after all.</p> <p>Right now, the size of the Abcbot botnet is still unknown to Cado and other researchers.</p> <p>“Given that the malware targets specific CSPs, this suggests that propagation is fairly limited,” Muir said.</p> <p>“The method of propagation (via enumeration of known_hosts) could absolutely mean that it has spread beyond the boundaries of the CSPs it was originally meant to target,” the Cado Security researcher added.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Secret Uganda deal: NSO to the brink
SOURCE	https://arstechnica.com/features/2021/12/the-secret-uganda-deal-that-has-brought-nso-to-the-brink-of-collapse/
GIST	<p>In February 2019, an Israeli woman sat across from the son of Uganda’s president and made an audacious pitch—would he want to secretly hack any phone in the world?</p> <p>Lt. General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, in charge of his father’s security and a long-whispered successor to Yoweri Museveni, was keen, said two people familiar with the sales pitch.</p> <p>After all, the woman, who had ties to Israeli intelligence, was pitching him Pegasus, a piece of spyware so powerful that Middle East dictators and autocratic regimes had been paying tens of millions for it for years.</p> <p>But for NSO, the Israeli company that created Pegasus, this dalliance into East Africa would prove to be the moment it crossed a red line, infuriating US diplomats and triggering a chain of events that would see it blacklisted by the commerce department, pursued by Apple, and driven to the verge of defaulting on its loans, according to interviews with US and Israeli officials, industry insiders, and NSO employees.</p> <p>A few months after the initial approach, NSO’s chief executive, Shalev Hulio, landed in Uganda to seal the deal, according to two people familiar with NSO’s East Africa business. Hulio, who flew the world with the permission of the Israeli government to sell Pegasus, liked to demonstrate in real time how it could hack a brand-new, boxed iPhone.</p> <p>The eventual business was small for NSO. A person familiar with the transaction said it brought in between \$10 million and \$20 million, a fraction of the \$243 million that Moody’s estimated the privately owned NSO made in revenues in 2020.</p> <p>But about two years after the sales pitch, someone deployed Pegasus to try to hack the phones of 11 American diplomats and employees of the US embassy in Uganda, according to two US officials, who spoke after notifications were sent out by Apple when the iPhone maker discovered and closed a flaw in its operating system in November.</p> <p>It is not clear who tried to hack the US citizens. Uganda’s neighbor, Rwanda, had also been using Pegasus to hack phones inside Uganda, but the revelation shocked the US. NSO has always told its customers that US phone numbers are off-limits. In this case, all 11 targets were using Ugandan numbers but had Apple logins using their State Department emails, according to the two US officials.</p> <p>NSO said it shut down the hacking systems for “customers relevant to this case” and is investigating the issue. A person familiar with the company said it no longer has any business in Africa.</p>

The presidential press secretary for Museveni and the minister of information for the Ugandan government did not reply to a request for comment. A person close to Museveni said they “were not authorized to speak on the subject.”

Israeli and US officials declined to confirm that the Ugandan hack directly triggered a decision to blacklist NSO. But one US official who discussed the issue with Israel’s defense ministry said: “Look at the entire sequence of events here—this is careful, not by chance.” He added that putting NSO, one of the jewels of Israel’s tech community, on a US blacklist was designed to “punish and isolate” the company.

The blacklisting, which came in November, means that NSO cannot buy any equipment, service, or intellectual property from US-based companies without approval, crippling a company whose terminals ran on servers from Dell and Intel, routers from Cisco, and whose desktop computers run on Windows operating systems, according to a spec sheet from a sale to Ghana, in West Africa.

In recent weeks, for instance, Intel asked all its employees to cease any ongoing business relationships with NSO, one person familiar with the matter said. Intel said in a statement that it “complies with all applicable US laws, including US export control regulations.”

A new CEO, Itzik Benbenisti, hired from Partner Communications, one of Israel’s largest telecom providers, quit two weeks into his new job after the blacklisting. And while the company tried to cheer up its employees with a Hanukkah party in the beach resort of Eilat, Hulio—who retook the reins after Benbenisti stepped down—was less sanguine in a recent phone call with an old business associate.

“We always knew this thing had an expiration date,” he told the friend, complaining that some clients had asked to shift their contracts to lesser-known rivals, according to a person familiar with the conversation.

After spending a decade in the favor of the Israeli government, NSO now finds itself as an irritant in relations between Israel and the US, using up vital foreign “policy bandwidth we need to talk about Iran,” said a foreign ministry official who asked for anonymity.

That is a reversal for NSO, which former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used as a diplomatic calling card with several countries, including the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, which did not have official relations with Israel.

The reputational damage has also made it difficult to keep hiring the most promising graduates of Israel’s elite signals intelligence units, who have the skills to repeatedly outwit the defenses of both Android phones and iPhones.

For example, when Google reverse-engineered the hack used against American diplomats in Uganda, it found an elegant, tiny piece of code that adapted software from 1990s Xerox machines to fit a so-called Turing machine—essentially a complete computer—into a single GIF file.

“Pretty incredible, and at the same time, pretty terrifying,” said Google’s engineers. “Wow. Just wow,” tweeted Yaniv Erlich, an Israeli professor of computer science at Columbia University.

“You can count on one hand the number of teams in the world that could create something like that,” said John Scott-Railton, a senior researcher at the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, which found the malware and brought it to Apple’s attention.

NSO said it had hired 30 new employees in recent weeks. “There is an understanding among our employees that there is a wide gap between media reports and the reality,” a spokesperson said.

Meanwhile, NSO has also fallen into the crosshairs of Silicon Valley, after angering Apple and Meta by hacking into iPhones and WhatsApp.

Apple's two-pronged approach—it has notified many of the targets of NSO's hacks, while suing the company in US courts—sent a "shockwave" through the industry, said a person familiar with the matter.

Apple and Citizen Lab have also shared NSO's technical secrets, worrying rival companies enough to ask their clients to dial down the use of other spyware, scared of getting caught in Apple's dragnet, said a former senior executive at an Israeli tech group.

"There is a sense that this is a full-on war against the entire industry," he said, adding that high-level Israeli employees of NSO and other similar firms are "staying put" in Israel to avoid being pulled in for questioning in the US and its allies.

For now, the US pressure had left NSO with few options, said company insiders. Moody's has downgraded NSO's debt as the company's free cash flow turned negative in 2020 and is expected to remain negative this year. "There's a high risk NSO might not be in compliance" with a covenant on the \$500 million in loans it took in 2019 to go private at a \$1 billion valuation, said Moody's.

It has hired Moelis & Co, a New York-based investment bank, to see if it can sell off parts of the company to raise cash, even offering to change Pegasus into a "defensive" product if that makes it more palatable to US investors.

Last Wednesday, that window also narrowed—18 US senators wrote to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen to sanction NSO under the Magnitsky Act, alongside a handful of other cyber surveillance firms.

If the US acts upon that request, NSO would be cut off from the US banking system, and its employees would be barred from traveling to the US.

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HEADLINE	12/22 Pysa ransomware 400% rise in attacks
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/this-ransomware-strain-just-started-targeting-lots-more-businesses/
GIST	<p>The relatively new Pysa ransomware was the dominant strain behind file-encrypting attacks in November and saw a 400% rise in attacks on government organizations, according to analysis by security company NCC Group.</p> <p>Pysa is one of the ransomware gangs utilizing double extortion to pressure victims to pay an extortion demand and dumped leaks from 50 previously compromised organizations last month. Overall in November, the number of Pysa attacks increased 50%, which means it overtook Conti to the join Lockbit in the top two the most common versions of the malware. Conti and Lockbit were the dominant strains since August, according to NCC Group.</p> <p>Inexplicably, the Pysa leaks data from targets weeks or months after attempting to extort them. The large-scale data dump followed joint US and EU law enforcement action against some members of the REvil ransomware gang, which were behind the attack on IT vendor Kaseya.</p> <p>Also known as Mespinoza, the Pysa gang seeks out evidence of crime among targets to use as leverage during typically multi-million dollar extortion negotiations.</p> <p>The FBI started tracking Pysa activity in March 2020 in ransomware attacks against government, institutions, private, and healthcare sectors. The group often employs phishing techniques for credentials to compromise Remote Desktop Protocol (RDP) connections.</p> <p>Pysa targets high-value finance, government and healthcare organizations, notes NCC Group.</p>

	<p>Across all ransomware gangs, victims from North America reached 154 during the month, of which 140 were US organizations, while European victims numbered 96 in November. The industrials sector was the most targeted in November while attacks on the technology sector decreased 38%.</p> <p>NCC Group also spotlights a Russian-speaking ransomware gang called Everest Group that's pushing new boundaries in double-extortion by not only threatening to leak files but providing their customers with access to victims IT infrastructure. Instead of pursuing a ransom, the group instead sold third-party access to the target's network, creating a new way to monetize a compromised target. If it proves lucrative, this could become a trend next year, NCC Group warns.</p> <p>"In November, the group offered paid access to the IT infrastructure of their victims, as well as threatening to release stolen data if the victim refused to pay a ransom," it notes.</p> <p>"While selling ransomware-as-a-service has seen a surge in popularity over the last year, this is a rare instance of a group forgoing a request for a ransom and offering access to IT infrastructure – but we may see copycat attacks in 2022 and beyond."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Log4j flaw fix: easier said than done
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/log4j-hack-security-update-ransomware/
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity professionals have spent weeks scrambling to address a bug in a widely used software library that could enable hackers to steal data, launch ransomware attacks or otherwise knock systems offline.</p> <p>The bug, known as Log4Shell, exists in Log4j, an open-source software tool that is used widely in the technology industry. The flaw could allow for attackers, in some cases, to take over vulnerable systems by duping a target into logging code capable of downloading malware hosted elsewhere.</p> <p>Given the ubiquity of the software and the sheer number of vulnerable systems, U.S. cybersecurity officials gave federal agencies until Dec. 23 to evaluate their exposure and take remediation steps, urging private sector entities to do the same.</p> <p>Jen Easterly, the director of the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, had previously called the bug perhaps "the most serious" she'd seen in her career. The CISA directive cited "active exploitation by multiple threat actors," while analysts at Microsoft and Mandiant reported seeing hackers thought to be associated with the governments of China, Iran, North Korea and Turkey working to leverage the flaw. Another DHS official, Jay Gazlay, speculated that "hundreds of millions" of devices could be affected.</p> <p>Where things stand</p> <p>In recent days there have been multiple reports of attackers looking to weaponize the bug for ransomware, trojans, and surreptitious cryptocurrency mining. One researcher claimed to find evidence of a Log4j-based worm, though others quickly question the idea and characterized such fears as overblown. The anxieties coincide with the Belgian Defense Ministry temporarily shuttering some of its networks to recover from a cyber incident in which unknown outsiders leveraged Log4Shell.</p> <p>The urgency of the threat is further complicated by the extent of the vulnerability.</p> <p>Java-based Log4j reportedly is implemented widely, including at technology firms like Google, Amazon and Microsoft, along with software vendors with millions of customers such as IBM, Oracle and Salesforce.</p> <p>Apache, which oversees the Log4j framework, issued its first patch for the flaw on Dec. 10, but has since had to release two additional patches. The initial patch mostly fixed the problem that would allow external code to run, but would allow, in some cases, for an attacker to deny service to the system entirely in what is</p>

known as a denial-of-service attack, or data exfiltration, in other cases. The second patch left open a pathway for outsider to launch denial-of-service attacks, in limited circumstances.

The latest patch, 2.17.0, was issued Dec. 18, earning the recommendation of CISA.

The flurry of activity [does not mark the first time that hastily applied patches](#) caused problems. In the wake of the [Meltdown and Spectre revelations](#) — where code run against the controlling software of a computer's operating system, the kernel, could reveal data — the fixes caused [notable computer performance slowdowns](#) in some cases, and seemingly random reboots in others. (In 2019, malware developers [built proof-of-concept code](#) that would exploit the so-called BlueKeep vulnerability before cyber personnel could widely distribute the necessary software update.)

The sheer scale of Log4j's use has further complicated matters. CISA's guidance on mitigation and potentially vulnerable software includes hundreds of vendors ranging from obscure to prominent, such as Amazon, Cisco, Dell, IBM and Microsoft. A particular vendor may have dozens of individual products or programs vulnerable to the problem, making it even more difficult for those responsible to address the issue.

Another problem is the tens of thousands of Java software packages that use Log4j. The "lack of visibility into [users'] dependencies and transitive dependencies has made patching difficult," researchers from [Google's Open Source Insights Team wrote](#) on Dec. 7. "It has also made it difficult to determine the full blast radius of this vulnerability."

A lingering threat

The researchers found nearly 36,000 Java software packages that depend on the affected Log4j code, most of which were indirect dependencies, which adds complexity and time for anybody responsible for fixing the problems.

Even as organizations work to identify vulnerable assets and apply the appropriate patch, the problem may not be totally solved and may not become known for months or even years. Skilled hackers will find ways into systems using the vulnerability before everything can be patched, and then lay low, experts say.

"We believe these actors will work quickly to create footholds in desirable networks for follow-on activity, which may last for some time," John Hultquist, vice president of intelligence analysis at cybersecurity firm Mandiant, previously said in a statement to CyberScoop.

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HEADLINE	12/22 Belgian military 5-day battle cyberattack
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/belgian-military-five-day-battle-against-cyberattack
GIST	<p>The Belgian military said on Tuesday it had been hit with a cyberattack five days ago and was still battling to restore affected parts of its system.</p> <p>Military spokesman Olivier Severin told AFP that elements hit by last Thursday's attack, which contaminated services connected to the internet, were still being analysed and restored.</p> <p>Severin did not name any group suspected of the attack and gave no further details of the systems involved.</p> <p>The attackers are believed to have targeted a vulnerability in Log4j, a logging library that keeps track of events on a system.</p> <p>The flaw, which was publicised earlier this month, was labelled "the single biggest, most critical vulnerability of the last decade" by US cybersecurity firm Tenable.</p>

	<p>It can allow attackers to take control of a machine, move around the victim's network and deploy ransomware and spyware.</p> <p>The Belgian military imposed "quarantine measures" to "contain the infected elements", Severin told the Belga press agency on Monday.</p> <p>Log4j is a common piece of code and the vulnerability has led to widespread concern, but no other attacks on major companies or institutions have yet been reported.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Escalation in healthcare data breaches
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/escalation-in-healthcare-data/
GIST	<p>The number of healthcare data breaches reported in the United States has increased for the third month in a row.</p> <p>Records kept by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights (OCR) indicate that the total number of reported data breaches impacting the US health sector in 2021 is likely to be higher than the total reported in any previous year.</p> <p>In November, the OCR received reports of 68 data breaches exposing 500 or more health records. This number was 15.25% higher than the 59 breaches reported in October.</p> <p>While August saw only 38 such breaches reported, 47 breaches were reported in September. The total number of data breaches of 500 or more records reported to the OCR from January 1 to November 30 is 614.</p> <p>The worst month for data breaches in the healthcare sector so far this year has been June, in which 70 breaches of 500 or more records were reported. July and November were tied for the second worst month, with 68 breaches reported in each month.</p> <p>While the number of individual data breaches has been increasing in recent months, the total number of records impacted by data breaches has diminished from October to November.</p> <p>Of the 68 total breaches reported in November, 2,370,600 healthcare records were exposed, impermissibly disclosed, or stolen. This figure was 33.95% lower than the number recorded in October.</p> <p>In November, the number of data breaches of 10,000 or more records that were reported to the HHS' Office for Civil Rights was 30. Of those incidents, four breaches resulted in the exposure or theft of more than 100,000 health records.</p> <p>The majority (55) of data breaches reported in November were caused by hacking or IT incidents. Theft accounted for two breaches, and 11 breaches were caused by unauthorized access or disclosure.</p> <p>A geographical analysis of data breaches recorded in November reveals that more breaches (seven) were reported in California and New York than in any other state. Maryland and Pennsylvania each reported four breaches, while two breaches each were reported in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and the District of Columbia.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Ransomware in double-extortion tactics
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/pysa-ransomware-behind-most-double-extortion-attacks-in-november/
GIST	Security analysts from NCC Group report that ransomware attacks in November 2021 increased over the past month, with double-extortion continuing to be a powerful tool in threat actors' arsenal.

Threat actors' focus is also shifting to entities belonging to the government sector, which received 400% more attacks than in October.

The spotlight in November was stolen by the PYSA ransomware group (aka Mespinoza), which had an explosive rise in infections, recording an increase of 50%.

Other dominant ransomware groups are Lockbit and Conti, which launched attacks against critical entities, albeit fewer than in previous months.

The first signs of PYSA activity reaching threatening levels became apparent in March 2021, leading to the FBI [publishing an alert](#) about the actor's activity escalation.

Like almost all ransomware groups currently, PYSA exfiltrates data from the compromised network and then encrypts the originals to disrupt operations.

The stolen files are used as leverage in ransom negotiations, where the attackers threaten to publicly release data if a ransom is not paid.

New extortion trends and tactics

Another actor the NCC group report focuses on is [Everest](#), a Russian-speaking ransomware gang who currently uses a new extortion method.

Whenever their ransom demands aren't met within the allocated negotiation time, Everest sells access to the victim's corporate network to other threat actors.

This practice creates additional troubles for the compromised entities, as they now have to manage multiple infections and repeated attacks simultaneously.

"While selling ransomware-as-a-service has seen a surge in popularity over the last year, this is a rare instance of a group forgoing a request for a ransom and offering access to IT infrastructure – but we may see copycat attacks in 2022 and beyond," comments [NCC Group's report](#).

Another trend that is expected to have a meteoric rise in December and the coming months is the exploitation of the Log4Shell exploit to deploy ransomware payloads.

Already, Conti worked on developing an infection chain [based on the Log4Shell exploit](#) and is likely using it to rapidly execute attacks on vulnerable networks.

Ransomware is a shifting threat that quickly evolves to new defenses, so several security precautions and measures are required to protect against it sufficiently.

If you're looking for the best prevention practices, you can start with [CISA's ransomware guide](#) that offers several solid security recommendations.

With Christmas approaching and the IT teams working understaffed due to holidays, applying defenses even at the last minute could prove a savior.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Hacker made millions: stolen SEC reports
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/russian-hackers-made-millions-by-stealing-sec-earning-reports/
GIST	A Russian national working for a cybersecurity company has been extradited to the U.S. where he is being charged for hacking into computer networks of two U.S.-based filing agents used by multiple companies to file quarterly and annual earnings through the Securities and Exchange Commissions (SEC) system.

Along with other conspirators, the individual made millions of U.S. dollars by trading on the material non-public information (MNPI) stolen from the two filings agents.

Stolen creds used for access

In a press release on Monday, the Department of Justice announced that 41-year old Vladislav Klyushin has been extradited to the U.S. from Switzerland, where he had been arrested on March 21.

“Klyushin is charged with conspiring to obtain unauthorized access to computers, and to commit wire fraud and securities fraud, and with obtaining unauthorized access to computers, wire fraud and securities fraud” - the [U.S. Department of Justice](#)

Klyushin was part of a larger group that used MNPI for trading in the securities of publicly traded companies for at least two years, between January 2018 and September 2020.

Four other Russians that have been charged but are currently at large, have been identified as Ivan Ermakov, Nikolai Rumiantcev, Mikhail Vladimirovich Irzak, and Igor Sergeevich Sladkov.

The defendants used compromised employee credentials to access the networks of the targeted filing agent and view or download data related to earnings of multiple companies, including SEC filings and press releases.

According to FBI Special Agent B.J. Kang, the intrusions were carried out through a VPN connection and the compromise of one of the two filing agents started in October 2017.

The intruders looked at documents from companies in various sectors of activity, among them being: IBM, Steel Dynamics, Avnet, Tesla, Box, Roku, Kohl's Corporation, Datadog, Altra Industrial Motion Corp, The Nielsen Company.

Having information about a company's performance before it became public, the individuals allegedly acted on it and “traded accordingly, in brokerage accounts held in their own names or in the names of others,” reads an [affidavit](#) from FBI special agent BJ Kang, specialized in investigating financial crimes.

A pentester and a Russian GRU officer involved

Of the five Russians charged, Klyushin, Ermakov, and Rumiantcev worked for a Moscow-based IT company called [M-13](#), which provides penetration testing services and red team engagements, which test the defenses of an organization by simulating targeted attacks.

The three M-13 employees, all of them holding deputy general director positions, also offered investment services, asking investors 60% of the profit, the DoJ says.

According to the company website, among M-13's customers are “the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, the Government of the Russian Federation, federal ministries and departments, regional state executive bodies.”

The connection with the Russian government, however, is deeper than this as Ermakov is a former officer in the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), the country's military intelligence agency.

If arrested, Ermakov also faces older charges related to hacking and influence efforts targeting the 2016 U.S. elections. Furthermore, he is suspected to have played a part in hacking and disinformation operations regarding the international anti-doping agencies, sporting federations, and anti-doping officials.

As per charging documents, the scheme was very lucrative. In about a year, one of the defendants, Irzak, traded ahead of public announcements of about 150 companies with a success rate of 66%.

	<p>Between December 2019 and August 2020, one account used by Irzak generated profits of about \$4.3 million from illegally trading ahead of earnings announcements of around 47 companies.</p> <p>Klyushin is risking a maximum penalty of five years in prison, three years of supervised release, and a \$250,000 fine for conspiring to get unauthorized access to computers, wire fraud, and securities fraud charges. The same maximum sentence is for the hacking activity.</p> <p>Securities fraud and wire fraud, however, each carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, three years of supervised release, and a \$250,000 fine.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Phishing network costs victims \$80M/mo.
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/scam-phishing-network-victims-80m/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Researchers have uncovered a sophisticated phishing campaign estimated to cost millions of global victims around \$80m per month.</p> <p>Security vendor Group-IB claimed the campaign targets users in over 90 countries, including the US, Canada, South Korea and Italy. It offers fake surveys and giveaways from popular brands, designed to steal their personal and financial data.</p> <p>The firm said that a single network targets around 10 million victims and 120 brands.</p> <p>“Fraudsters trap their victims by distributing invitations to partake in survey, after which the user would allegedly get a prize. Each such offer contains a link leading to the survey website. For ‘lead generation,’ the threat actors use all possible legitimate digital marketing means: contextual advertising, advertising on legal and completely rogue sites, SMS, mailouts, and pop-up notifications,” Group-IB explained.</p> <p>“To build trust with their victims, scammers register look-alike domain names to the official ones. Less frequently, they were also seen adding links to the calendar and posts on social networks. After clicking the targeted link, a user gets in the so-called traffic cloaking, which enables cyber-criminals to display different content to different users, based on certain user parameters.”</p> <p>While the victim is being redirected to this ‘branded survey,’ information about their session is recorded and used to customize a final malicious link that can only be opened once – complicating efforts to detect and take down the scam.</p> <p>“At the final stage, the user is asked to answer questions to receive a prize from a well-known brand and to fill out a form asking for their personal data, which is allegedly needed to receive the prize,” Group-IB noted.</p> <p>“The data required usually includes the full name, email, postal address, phone number, bank card data, including expiration date and CVV.”</p> <p>The vendor’s head of digital risk protection in Europe, Dmitriy Tiunkin, described the current landscape as a “scamdemic.”</p> <p>The firm found 60 different networks operating similar targeted links, each containing over 70 domain names.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 ‘Serious security risks’ K-12 school apps
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/study-finds-serious-security-risks-in-k-12-school-apps/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Many apps used by schools contain features that can lead to the “unregulated and out of control” sharing of student data to advertising companies and other security issues, according to a report published Monday by the nonprofit Me2B Alliance.</p>

The report [follows up on research](#) published by the group in May, which audited 73 apps used by 38 schools to find that 60% of them were sending student data to a variety of third parties. Roughly half of them were sending student data to Google, while 14% were sending data to Facebook.

In the update, Me2B specifically looked at the use of a common feature called “WebView,” which allows developers to integrate web pages into apps. Although the feature allows schools to include dynamic details—like calendars and results of sporting events—in apps without having to update the app itself, it can lead to the siphoning of student data and, in particularly bad cases, students and parents being targeted by scams.

For example, on several occasions the researchers observed the hijacking of web pages linked to by school apps, leading users to malicious sites. An app used by Maryland’s largest school district accidentally directed users to a compromised site that once was used for the district’s sports teams. The Quinlan, Texas school district had a sports domain integrated into its app that was purchased by an unknown actor for \$30 before anyone took action—a security threat that’s sometimes called a “dangling domain.”

Cybercriminals and scammers regularly [scan for expired URLs](#) and use them for business email compromise schemes, phishing attacks, and malicious advertising campaigns. Schools might fall victim to these attacks if they forget to renew their domains, or if they stop using a domain without realizing it’s integrated into their apps for students.

“In this instance, schools seem to have just selected private domain registrars for their non-.gov domain registrations, and then merely forgot to renew the domains,” said Zach Edwards, who is in charge of data integrity testing for the Me2B Alliance. “Apparently the schools didn’t even notice they lost control of the domains until we reported the compromises.”

The report offers several recommendations to mitigate security risks highlighted in the report, including training for app administrators, creating processes at schools for keeping track of expiring URLs, requiring schools to report lost or dangling domains within a specific time, and launching a “privacy bounty program” at the US Department of Education to audit school apps.

But perhaps the fastest way to reduce these risks is to alter the way the apps work. “Apple and Google can change rules for in-app WebView links to ensure app developers can’t overrule a local device browser preference,” Edwards said.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Ubisoft confirms video game data breach
SOURCE	https://portswigger.net/daily-swig/ubisoft-confirms-just-dance-video-game-data-breach?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Ubisoft has announced a data breach after unknown actors targeted its popular video game franchise, Just Dance.</p> <p>The games developer confirmed that customer information may have been accessed after attackers took advantage of a “misconfiguration” to steal data.</p> <p>A statement from Ubisoft said that the breach was limited to ‘technical identifiers’ including GamerTags, profile IDs, and device IDs, as well as recordings of Just Dance videos that were uploaded to be shared publicly with the in-game community and/or on social media profiles.</p> <p>It adds: “This incident was the result of a misconfiguration, that once identified, was quickly fixed, but made it possible for unauthorized individuals to access and possibly copy some personal player data.</p> <p>“Our investigation has not shown that any Ubisoft account information has been compromised as a result of this incident.”</p>

	Ubisoft has advised all Just Dance users to reset their passwords and to use two-factor authentication.
	More information on what steps users should take can be found on a forum post from the Just Dance team.
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HEADLINE	12/21 New market of stolen information: 2easy
SOURCE	https://ke-la.com/2easy-logs-marketplace-on-the-rise/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>As part of KELA's continuous monitoring of communities and markets in the cybercrime underground, KELA identified a rise in the activity of a relatively new market of stolen user information, called "2easy". The market is an automated platform where different actors sell "logs" – data and browser-saved information harvested from machines (bots) all over the world infected with information-stealing malware. Currently, the market offers information stolen from almost 600,000 bots.</p> <p>Based on analysis of the data collected by KELA's systems from this market, as of December 2021, the market hosts 18 sellers offering their infostealer logs for sale. Investigation of these sellers' activities in the cybercrime underground, as well as feedback about the market posted to dark web sources, indicates that the market has a certain recognition among cybercriminals that deal with stolen credentials; they provide mostly positive feedback. As such, KELA assesses that credentials sold in 2easy are generally valid and may present a direct threat to organizations. KELA's analysis of the market finds that RedLine information stealing malware is the most popular choice for the market's vendors – with over 50% of the machines offered for sale on the market being infected with RedLine.</p> <p>The Market: Background, Prices, and Features KELA identified that 2easy's administrators have been advertising the market in various Russian-speaking hacking forums since March 2020. Based on the claims of the actors behind 2easy, the market is operating from 2019, though only in 2021 it has started to significantly grow. Domain registration records support the claimed operations start date – it was registered in the end of 2018 and is currently hosted by a Ukrainian provider that is also advertised in cybercrime communities.</p> <p>In 2021, updates were also implemented by 2easy developers. While in July 2020 the market offered access to logs harvested from 28,000 bots, it currently boasts logs from almost 600,000 bots.</p> <p>Compared to prices on two other infamous markets, Genesis and Russian Market, 2easy lists relatively cheap bots – with most of them having prices below USD 5. On Genesis, during the past year, most of the bots were offered for USD 5-25, and on Russian Market – for USD 10-15.</p> <p>The market's GUI enables its users to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • view all URLs to which the infected machines logged in. • search URLs of interest. • browse through a list of infected machines from which credentials to said website were stolen. • check the seller's rating. • review tags assigned by sellers, which most times include the date the machine was infected and sometimes additional notes from the seller. • acquire credentials to selected targets. <p>However, unlike other botnet markets KELA monitors, very little information about the victim is available prior to the purchase (e.g., no redacted IP address or OS version).</p> <p>When a bot is purchased, a buyer receives an archived (zipped) file containing folders and files with stolen data and information about the bot: saved credentials and credit cards, a list of installed browsers and software, a list of processes, user information, some files, and more. The type of data the buyer gets depends on the capabilities of infostealers used; different malware strains may be focused on stealing various types of data.</p> <p>As other markets of this kind, 2easy offers an option to refund purchases if they are of bad quality – namely they do not contain passwords and cookies (if it was not specified prior to the purchase). Purchases</p>

can also be refunded if there are traces that these logs have been previously used by other cybercriminals, which is apparently a measure to prevent reselling of logs from other markets or providers on 2easy.

The Sellers and their Malware

2easy frequently advertises an opportunity to join the market as a seller. Based on 350,000 bots that were processed by KELA's systems for this analysis, the market has 18 sellers, with the top 4 sellers offering almost 94% of all bots listed on the market. Moreover, the most active actor named DarkSeller sells logs harvested from almost 60% of all 2easy bots.

Analyzing the data collected by KELA's threat intelligence platform from the market, a unique piece of information was identified that makes it evident that 50% of the detected bots included information stolen by the RedLine infostealer. However, only 5 of the sellers use it exclusively, while 4 others appear to leverage other malware as well. For example, DarkSeller was also seen using Raccoon, another public stealer popular among cybercriminals.

KELA researched the top sellers on 2easy and identified some of them as being active or discussed as sellers on several Russian-speaking forums, such as XSS, Exploit, LolzTeam, and others. While they did not reveal other malware used by them, some of them were seen using additional services that facilitate the theft of information.

For example, the 2easy seller Mayson_logs – identified by KELA as using the handle mayson147 on other communities – was observed using a service named “Univer City”, which apparently provides access to infostealers, as well as means to distribute them. It is not clear if “Univer City” provides some private stealers or commodity stealers, such as RedLine. Mayson_logs, in its turn, was observed using both RedLine and other infostealers as well, so both options are possible. “Univer City” also provides a way to massively distribute malicious files through disseminating malicious links via YouTube video descriptions, which may hint that Mayson_logs uses it as an initial infection vector.

Interestingly, “Univer City” appropriates logs related to Google Pay, which means that users of this service can no longer sell or leverage them. Apparently, “Univer City” uses these logs for further malicious actions. KELA is familiar with other services working on similar conditions and possibly used by some sellers of 2easy. The assessment stems from the fact that several 2easy users claim in tags that some specific type of resources (in most cases, cryptocurrency wallets) were “worked out”. This means that if credentials to such resources are contained in logs, they will not be valid, which can occur due to several reasons:

1. The seller used a service similar to “Univer City” and gave away specific logs to the service.
2. The seller bought the logs from another cybercriminal who had already used them.
3. The seller used specific logs for his own malicious activities. For example, ALLLL was seen using a tool named StealerLogSearcher and intended for searching specific resources in stolen logs.

As for the reputation of 2easy sellers, KELA observed scam accusations, but they proved to be inaccurate, according to the accusers themselves. For example, a user named 166MMX was accused of scam and directly associated with the market user Noname_logs. However, further investigation showed that a user who accused this actor of scamming mistakenly connected two different users.

Therefore, KELA assesses that sellers on 2easy appear to be credible, albeit relatively low level, actors – using commodity infostealers and, at least in some cases, third-party services for spreading and management of their malware. KELA did not observe chatter massively accusing 2easy or its sellers of scam, though some users complained about invalid information in the logs. KELA will continue to monitor the market to further research the legitimacy of its offers.

Why is it So Important?

KELA monitors various botnet market sources, such as 2easy, which sell access to data from machines infected with information-stealing trojans such as RedLine, AZORult, Vidar, Raccoon, and others. These machines contain saved credentials and personal information belonging to either employees, clients, or

partners. These credentials constitute a cheap and easy-to-get possible initial entry point to an organization's network.

Such an example can be observed through the attack of Electronic Arts that was disclosed in June 2021. The attack reportedly began with hackers who purchased stolen cookies sold online for just \$10 and continued with hackers using those credentials to gain access to a Slack channel used by EA. Once in the Slack channel, those hackers successfully tricked one of EA's employees to provide a multifactor authentication token, which enabled them to steal multiple source codes for EA games.

KELA also observed logs being leveraged to gain network access – a term that refers to remote access to a computer in a compromised organization. Threat actors selling these accesses are referred to as Initial Access Brokers (IABs). Some of them explicitly say they obtain network access they trade from logs.

When searching for network access types popular among IABs in logs traded on 2easy, KELA discovered the following results (meaning that logs contain credentials to these URLs):

- 2,480 login pages for Pulse Secure VPN
- 2,261 login pages for various VPN products
- 637 login pages for Citrix ADC (formerly NetScaler ADC)
- 499 login pages for Cisco ASA WebVPN
- 332 login pages for RDWeb
- 206 login pages for Global Protect VPN

Considering the crucial role that [IABs play in the Ransomware-as-a-Service \(RaaS\) ecosystem](#), linking opportunistic attacks with targeted ones, monitoring markets as 2easy becomes crucial as it may help to interrupt this supply chain at the beginning.

Hence, if purchased by threat actors, the stolen credentials represent a considerable cyber risk to the organization, as the actors may leverage this access to perform a lateral movement to compromise multiple computers across the organization's network. This may result in various types of malicious activities, such as exfiltrating sensitive data of the organization and its clients, as well as in deploying different malware, like ransomware.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Concerns: 5G interference aviation safety
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/dec/21/airbus-and-boeing-express-concerns-over-5g-interference-in-us
GIST	<p>The aerospace giants Airbus and Boeing on Tuesday warned that the US aviation industry had “concerns” about the potential interference of 5G networks with vital flight safety equipment.</p> <p>The intervention increases pressure on US regulators in a dispute between airlines and mobile operators over the introduction of the high-speed mobile broadband technology in the US.</p> <p>The Airbus Americas chief executive, Jeff Knittel, and the Boeing boss, David Calhoun, co-signed a letter to the US transportation secretary, Pete Buttigieg, “detailing the US aviation industry’s shared concerns over 5G implementation in the United States”, an Airbus spokesperson told AFP.</p> <p>“Airbus and Boeing have been working with other aviation industry stakeholders in the US to understand potential 5G interference with radio altimeters,” which measure a plane’s height above the ground, the statement said.</p> <p>Boeing said the aerospace industry was focused on “fully evaluating and addressing the potential for 5G interference with radio altimeters”.</p>

“We are collaborating with aviation authorities, government leaders, airlines, and industry groups to ensure the continued operational safety of aircraft throughout the aviation system worldwide,” it added in a statement.

Leading telecom operators Verizon and AT&T were due to start using 3.7-3.8 GHz frequency bands on 5 December, after obtaining licences worth billions of dollars in February.

But they postponed the launch in November after the US aviation regulator expressed concerns over 5G signals’ possible interference with the altimeters.

The Federal Aviation Administration requested further information about the instruments, which can use the same frequency bands as 5G.

The FAA also produced directives limiting the use of radio altimeters in certain situations, sparking US airline fears over the potential costs.

In November, Verizon and AT&T wrote to the Federal Communications Commission confirming their intention to start deploying 5G in January 2022.

But they said they would take extra precautionary measures beyond what is required by US law until July 2022 while the FAA completed its investigation.

The conflict between 5G networks and aircraft equipment led French authorities to recommend switching off mobile phones with 5G on planes in February.

France’s civil aviation authority said interference from a signal on a nearby frequency to the radio altimeter with similar or greater power would cause “critical” errors during landing.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/21 Bagram air base: notorious prison empty
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-bagram-prison.html
GIST	<p>On July 1, with little warning and no public ceremony, U.S. forces abandoned the sprawling Bagram Air Base, the hub of the 20-year American war effort in Afghanistan. Six weeks later, on Aug. 15, Taliban fighters swept into the base and freed thousands of prisoners — including senior Taliban and Al Qaeda figures — from a prison complex at Bagram.</p> <p>A base that was once a bustling city housing tens of thousands of troops is now a desolate ruin. Within Bagram’s concrete blast walls, a bedraggled unit of Taliban fighters guards the emptied prison, once the site where the U.S. military detained thousands of people suspected of being insurgents, often for long periods without charge or trial. The guards camp amid mountains of debris and personal belongings abandoned by fleeing prisoners, and damaged equipment left by U.S. and Afghan government forces.</p> <p>Several Taliban guards recently allowed the photographer David Guttenfelder to tour the prison, where he climbed into cells littered with clothing, notebooks, drawings, toilet items and trash. Among the items were shoes made from orange prison uniforms. The photographer entered the cells through ragged holes in prison walls smashed open by fleeing inmates.</p> <p>In prison yards and along walkways, Mr. Guttenfelder encountered uniforms, helmets, riot shields, handcuffs and other items abandoned by Afghan government guards. The United States turned the base over to Afghan forces in July.</p>

The prison, known as the Detention Facility in Parwan, was [built by the United States](#) in 2009. It replaced a nearby detention center at Bagram, known as the Bagram Collection Point, where detainees endured abusive treatment at the base. American military pathologists ruled that [two detainees](#) died in 2002 from beatings inflicted while in U.S. custody.

While the Parwan facility provided more humane conditions for prisoners, it became the source of violent protests in February 2012 that led to the deaths of Afghans and Americans after Qurans confiscated from [prisoners were burned by U.S. soldiers](#).

The United States [transferred](#) the Parwan detention facility to Afghan government control in 2013 after turning over [3,000 Afghan](#) prisoners to Afghan custody.

In 2019, the United Nations [reported](#) that the facility, under the control of the Afghan National Army, was overcrowded and that solitary confinement was being used as a form of discipline.

When American forces seized Bagram Air Base in late 2001, it was an abandoned wreck fought over by the Taliban and U.S.-backed Northern Alliance militias. The base was first constructed by the Soviet Union in the 1950s and served as a hub for Soviet military operations for a decade before troops withdrew in 1989.

Rebuilt by the U.S. military, Bagram expanded into a home away from home for tens of thousands of U.S. and NATO troops. They ate at American fast-food restaurants and bought electronics, T-shirts and groceries at a vast post exchange. They dined on pizzas, hot dogs, hamburgers and ice cream at several well-stocked DFACs, or dining facilities.

From two long runways, American fighter planes took off day and night to support the U.S. war effort and, later, U.S.-backed Afghan government soldiers and police.

Today, the base and the prison are quiet. Taliban guards said Bagram was controlled by two Taliban commanders, one with 500 men under his command and the other with 200 men.

The prison guards, members of a unit from Helmand Province, said they were eager to see nearby Kabul, the Afghan capital, for the first time. The men operate from a cargo container and sleep on mattresses atop wooden pallets. Some spend their time picking trash out of concertina wire, tidying up a facility that is their temporary home.

One guard said he would rather be elsewhere in Afghanistan, helping fellow Afghans, instead of guarding an abandoned prison. Another contended that the United States had spent billions of dollars on the base and prison that could have been used for humanitarian projects.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/21 Groups warn of counterfeit masks
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/groups-warn-of-counterfeit-masks-as-higher-quality-masks-are-sought
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - This week, the CDC labeled the omicron variant the dominant strain in the United States, but local numbers had already indicated omicron's ability to rapidly spread here in Washington.</p> <p>According to UW Medicine experts, 70% of sampled positive cases were linked to the omicron variant as of last week. The expectation is that the percentage will rise, and overall cases will increase in the coming weeks.</p>

King County – where more than 85% of residents have completed their vaccine series, per Public Health Seattle & King County – recently moved back into the CDC’s “high transmission” rate, the highest rate the CDC gives. Jefferson County is the only county that isn’t at that stage in all of Puget Sound.

"We are really encouraging folks to get masks that fit well, that are like KN-95 or equivalent that [have] a good barrier between you and others," said Public Health interim director Dennis Worsham.

During the early months of the pandemic, higher quality masks were not recommended, but that directive changed a long time ago, and with omicron rapidly spreading across the U.S. more and more people are trying to find safe masks.

"It’s not just the brand, and it’s not just the standard, it’s the whole thing," cautioned Anne Miller, executive director of Project N95. "Is it a legitimate product? Is it made to the standard? Is it from a real source, or has someone made a counterfeit?"

Miller’s group has helped connect people with more than 12 million legitimate masks, while donating an excess of 2 million masks. Their website, where you can [shop online here](#), ensures that the masks they sell are real. They also buy in bulk, which allows them to drive down the cost of masks for everyday individuals.

According to Miller, Project N95 routinely discovers fake masks from people who reach out for direction. In Washington state, more than [2 million counterfeit masks](#) were found within hospitals. A larger national investigation uncovered more than 10 million that had been purchased by healthcare providers across the country – highlighting the concern.

In the past week the CDC updated [their website](#) with tips on spotting fakes, and/or falsely marketed products. Some trade groups have estimated as many as half – or more – masks being sold as N-95 or KN-95 masks are fake.

"I know people who work really hard for their money, and they should know they have protection," said Miller, who lost a loved-one to COVID-19 herself. "They should know they have protection, you shouldn’t go out think you’re safe, and then end up not being protected."

For more information on Project N95 you can visit their website, [here](#). Or you can shop online, [here](#).

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HEADLINE	12/22 Chicago breaks record: latest 1st snowfall
SOURCE	https://www.accuweather.com/en/winter-weather/no-snow-chicago-breaks-record-for-latest-ever-1st-snowfall/1112178
GIST	<p>Chicago’s snowfall drought has officially reached record status, and AccuWeather meteorologists say it could be until 2022 before any measurable snow is recorded.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, the last time Chicago experienced measurable snowfall of 0.1 of an inch or more was earlier this year on March 15 when 1.8 inches fell. Though snow has fallen on five days since the beginning of December, none of it was enough to measure. The previous date for the latest measurable snowfall on record for O’Hare Airport in Chicago is Dec. 20, 2012, and the Windy City just shattered that record when measurable snowfall did not materialize on Monday.</p> <p>Now that winter has officially arrived, Chicago’s immediate chances of snowfall look about the same that they did through fall.</p> <p>"It doesn't look like Chicago will be in line for any accumulating snow through the [upcoming] weekend, at least," said AccuWeather Meteorologist Alex DaSilva. In fact, high temperatures rose into the lower 40s F on Tuesday, with no precipitation, frozen or otherwise.</p>

Temperatures are anticipated to dip on Wednesday then rise again at the end of the week, making for a mild holiday weekend in Chicagoland. Low temperatures likely won't drop below freezing levels Thursday night, and high temperatures will reach a maximum around 50 F on Christmas Eve. A [white Christmas is not looking likely](#) for the Windy City this year.

No snow was recorded in Chicago on Monday, meaning the city set a new record for latest first measurable snow of the season. Should it not snow enough to measure through Dec. 31, the longest stretch of days without measurable snow would also be broken. In 2012, there was no measurable snow from March 4 through Dec. 19, or 190 consecutive days. That year, it snowed 0.3 of an inch on March 4 and 0.2 of an inch on Dec. 20.

As of Dec. 21, there have been 181 consecutive days without measurable snow in Chicago. Nine more days are needed to tie and 10 would break the record.

"Looking at the weather pattern through the end of the year, while there will be an active storm track across the northern tier of the Midwest, cold air may not hook up with each system in just the right way to allow significant snow to fall in Chicago," AccuWeather Senior Meteorologist Alex Sosnowski said.

"The majority of precipitation with most storms every few days through the end of the month looks to be rain, but since it only takes 0.1 of an inch of snow to snap the record, it could still be tough to get all the way to Dec. 31 without snow," Sosnowski said.

This seasonal lack of snow is in part due to the overall unusually warm conditions this month.

"Temperatures during the first 21 days of this December have averaged 7.2 degrees above normal, and the overall weather has been more typical of October," Sosnowski said.

To put that in perspective, highs typically trend downward from the low 40s to start the month to the lower 30s by the end of the month and low temperatures trend downward through the 20s as December progresses.

The temperature soared above 50 degrees Fahrenheit seven days so far this month and has reached into the 60s three times. Last Wednesday and Thursday, Chicagoland set two new high temperature records in the middle 60s. The previous record for Dec. 16 was 60 F set in 1984.

Several other cities in the region had temperatures reach new heights, including [St. Louis](#), which recorded a high of 71, just one degree above the old record set back in 1889.

"There seems to be a theme for much of the central U.S. this December with warmth and snowless streaks," Sosnowski said, adding that the jet stream has allowed storms to hammer much of the western third of the nation. Those storms have been riding well to the north over the Midwest as they travel across the country.

Chicago's situation is similar to [Denver from earlier this season](#). December began with a high temperature more reflective of a summer day in the Mile High City as the mercury rose to 73 F. This was the highest temperature Denver had reported for the month [in more than 40 years](#). It also tied the daily high record for Dec. 1.

"After setting a record for the latest in the season for the first measurable snow, the Mile High City finally got its first snowfall with 0.3 of an inch on Dec. 10," Sosnowski said and added as of Dec. 20, snowfall has remained scarce and it has not snowed enough to measure since.

Denver managed to tie its record for all-time consecutive days without measurable snow this year with 232 days, a mark that was also reached in 1887, according to the National Weather Service. In 1887, it did not snow enough to measure from March 5 to Oct. 22. There was no daily snowfall of 0.1 of an inch or more from April 22 to Dec. 9 this year.

	<p>Salt Lake City also had an abnormally dry and warm fall this year, as its average first measurable snowfall is around Nov. 7. This year, the city's first measurable snowfall occurred on Dec. 9 when a storm brought 1.4 inches. The last time Salt Lake had a first measurable snowfall in December was 2017, and this has occurred only two times before then.</p> <p>Portions of the northern Plains and Upper Midwest have been getting snow by managing to stay on the colder side of the storms. Minneapolis is actually a tad above average in the snowfall department so far with 17.2 inches compared to an average of 14.8 inches through Dec. 20. Detroit is also a bit above average with 7.8 inches of snow versus a normal of 6.7 inches.</p> <p>Much of southern Canada has been blanketed by snow this autumn, so should a cold wave get rolling, it could have a considerable bite and set the stage for snow for the next storm.</p> <p>"It would not take much for cold waves to be a bit more persistent and for snow to dip farther south in the Midwest with only a slight shift in the storm track; we have the whole winter to go," Sosnowski said. Astronomical winter officially began on Tuesday, Dec. 21, at 9:59 a.m. CST.</p> <p>While the ongoing lack of snow may be disappointing to some around the holidays, it will ease holiday travel in much of the Central and Eastern states with near-perfect weather conditions for last-minute holiday shopping. Still, there could be airline delays and flight cancellations due to aircraft and crews being displaced from the stormy pattern in the West.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Long Covid patients: vibrations, tremors
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/long-covid-patients-report-vibrations-tremors-my-body-is-moving-inside-its-jolting-11640098486?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5
GIST	<p>For Kerri McCrossen Morrison, the sensation feels like an electric toothbrush going off in her chest. The feeling is so intense that it wakes her from a deep sleep at times.</p> <p>"It feels like someone put something on my bed and it's vibrating," she says. "My body is moving inside, it's jolting, and at night it's really bad."</p> <p>The unusual internal vibrations and external tremors Ms. Morrison describes have gained more attention lately among long Covid patient advocates, who are trying to raise discussion among doctors and researchers.</p> <p>Ms. Morrison, a 50-year-old transplant coordinator at a New Orleans hospital, says the sensations are among the symptoms she has experienced since testing positive for Covid-19 in March 2020.</p> <p>Long Covid patients—estimated to be 10% to 30% of people who have had Covid-19—experience a range of symptoms including fatigue, cognitive problems, shortness of breath and sensory issues, such as numbness and tingling. Internal vibrations and external tremors are less common and have received less attention.</p> <p>Yet a study this summer from the Patient-Led Research Collaborative, a group of long Covid patients that conduct research, found that roughly 40% of patients reported experiencing tremors and 30% vibrating sensations.</p> <p>Doctors say it is likely a minority of patients who experience vibrations and tremors. Clinics at Northwestern and Mount Sinai say they haven't seen many patients complaining of such sensations. However, a long Covid clinic at Mayo Clinic asks patients about such symptoms and finds that a significant percentage of patients report them.</p>

“It is something we see quite frequently,” says Greg Vanichkachorn, an occupational and aerospace medicine physician at Mayo, who works with long Covid patients in the first three months after their acute infection. He estimates Mayo sees it in about 40% to 50% of the long Covid patients in the first three months after their acute infection. He says for some patients the symptoms are very debilitating and for others they are more of a nuisance.

Doctors don’t know what is causing the mysterious symptoms. Some think it may be the result of autonomic nervous system dysfunction, which is common among many long Covid patients, or damage to the nerves. Others say it could be a problem with processing in the brain.

Ryan Hurt, the head of post-Covid research and clinical practice at Mayo, says a case report he wrote of a patient suffering myriad neurological symptoms including internal vibrations is currently under review for publication.

Dr. Hurt says brain scans of some long Covid patients suffering from fatigue show decreased function or activity in the brain. It could be caused by neuroinflammation or blood flow problems, he says. Another factor may be what is called central sensitization syndrome, which occurs when the brain is more reactive, Dr. Hurt says.

“Pain is perceived in the brain,” says Dr. Hurt. “The brain becomes really sensitive to stimuli. So the problem may not be compression of the nerves but it’s the brain where all the information is processed.” In those cases, what feels like neuropathy, which is damage to the nervous system, wouldn’t necessarily originate in the nerves but in the brain.

Nick Güthe says his wife, Heidi Ferrer, a 50-year-old screenwriter who wrote for the television series “Dawson’s Creek,” died by suicide in May after struggling with long Covid symptoms for more than a year. Severe internal vibrations in the last month of life prevented her from being able to sleep at night, he says.

“When they started, the tremors were manageable. They came on for a minute or two,” he says. “The internal vibrations that started at night were the final straw. She described it as someone inserting a cellphone in her chest and turning it on vibrate. It would wake her up and made it impossible to get more than two hours of sleep,” he says.

Since his wife’s death, Mr. Güthe has become a long Covid advocate serving on the advisory board of Survivor Corps. He helped spearhead [another recent study](#) to see if others were also experiencing the internal and external vibrations. The study analyzed hundreds of patient stories solicited from social media. The results, which haven’t been peer-reviewed, were posted [on the preprint server medRxiv](#) in December.

Richa Sharma, a vascular neurologist at Yale School of Medicine who was a co-author on the study, says patient comments and emails described a constellation of symptoms—including tremors, pain, vibration, and burning—that occurred either periodically or constantly, and could last for months. Ms. Morrison’s experience was included in the study.

Dr. Sharma speculates that there may be some degree of peripheral or central nervous system dysregulation that may be related to the initial infection that is causing the symptoms. Another possible explanation is a post-infectious inflammatory response, she says.

Ms. Morrison says her internal tremors progressed to seizure-like activity and she now takes seizure medication prescribed by her doctor. Her symptoms are so severe she says she had to stop working in May and is in the process of applying for long-term disability.

She likens the internal vibrations, which started a few months after she got Covid-19, to feeling like she is on a roller coaster. Eventually they progressed so you could see them, sometimes causing her legs and arms to jerk, she says.

	<p>She says she has many other symptoms, including brain fog, fatigue and headaches, but says the internal vibrations are the scariest. “I’m afraid to drive,” she says. “Your body, you’re not in control.”</p> <p>Once she joined long Covid support groups online in July of 2020 she says she started to see other people experiencing similar symptoms. “I started crying,” she says. “There’s no way to talk to people and tell them you’re internally vibrating. You sound crazy.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Pet-food shortage: owners scrambling
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-pet-food-shortage-is-real-and-owners-are-scrambling-its-been-a-waking-nightmare-11640103574?mod=hp_featst_pos5
GIST	<p>After an online order didn’t show on time, Phyllis Pometta stopped at five different stores before she hit pay dirt. There it was on the shelf: beef stew-flavored dog food.</p> <p>Ms. Pometta scooped up about four cans, which weren’t her preferred brand. She was desperate, with supplies of the food she usually bought for her dog nowhere to be found online or in stores.</p> <p>Karma, a Pomeranian rescue, wasn’t as desperate. She sniffed the food and rejected it.</p> <p>Ms. Pometta coaxed the dog to try it by adding beef-flavored treats, which gave Karma an upset stomach for days. After that, Ms. Pometta said she resorted to making Karma’s meals herself, cooking chicken with rice, carrots and peas on her stovetop, which Karma is happy to eat.</p> <p>“It’s hard enough feeding [five] people,” Ms. Pometta said, referring to her family. “I don’t want to be making dog food.”</p> <p>While shoppers scour stores and online vendors for videogame consoles and bicycles, pet owners like Ms. Pometta are queuing after puréed fish and properly sized kibble, as supply-chain problems disrupt pet-food supplies.</p> <p>Shortages of labor, raw materials and transportation are crimping the human food supply, from beverages to snacks. The challenge is the same for pet food, and is even more acute, supermarket executives say, because of the sudden high demand. More people have adopted pets during the Covid-19 pandemic, and pet owners are buying bigger volumes of food. Pet-food sales at supermarkets grew 6.9% over the past 52 weeks ended Nov. 27, compared with 2.3% for food overall, according to research firm NielsenIQ.</p> <p>The crunch is putting some pet owners in a bind—particularly those whose pets require prescribed food or have dietary restrictions. Dogs and cats often get attached to a specific brand or flavor of food, pet owners said, and can have physical reactions if forced to change.</p> <p>Serafin Burciaja said he has hit multiple Walmarts in his neighborhood in Chandler, Ariz., to look for small-bite dog food for his Manchester terrier, who is older and can’t chew big chunks.</p> <p>“You want to feed them like family,” Mr. Burciaja said. “It puts me in a bad place at times, just having the thought that it could run out at any time for quite some time.”</p> <p>In Lacey, Wash., Lynda Ryba drove an hour in November to buy about 80 cans of roasted chicken and rice for her cats at PetSmart—about a six-week supply.</p> <p>Ms. Ryba, a freelance copy editor, said the products from Hill’s Pet Nutrition Inc., which have a chunky consistency, were out of stock in her area for weeks. Her two American shorthair cats were unamused by other, pâté-style products—they didn’t devour them the way they did their usual meals, she said.</p>

“It’s nerve-racking, especially if we are getting down to the last cans,” Ms. Ryba said. She said she now stockpiles cans of the Hill’s cat food whenever possible.

Many supermarkets, unable to find substitutes, are leaving pet-food shelves empty. Pet-food manufacturers, struggling to secure ingredients and expand production, have signaled that shortages could persist. [J.M. Smucker](#) Co. notified retailers in November that it would limit shipments of some pet-food products through January 2023, citing transportation challenges with the supply of wet food—which typically uses imported ingredients.

[Freshpet](#) Inc., which makes refrigerated dog food and dry food for cats, is expanding its suppliers of turkey and plastic film, used in packaging, and has added production capacity, said Chief Executive Billy Cyr. But equipment for new production lines is getting held up at ports, and construction materials are running low, he said.

Miruna Barnoschi, a lecturer and doctoral candidate at Northwestern University, goes to her local Target and Jewel-Osco stores in Chicago every two to three days in search of seafood-flavored wet cat food. She has befriended managers who let her know that new shipments of pet food typically arrive on Wednesdays.

Still, it has been two months since Ms. Barnoschi has found Spinoza’s preferred variety. Spinoza—named after a graduate course on the philosopher—settles for poultry and beef-flavored food, but doesn’t purr or lick up morsels after meals.

“He looks at me with these sad eyes that are like, ‘Why won’t you give me the flavor I like?’ ” she said.

Mira Crisp has been paying nearly double for cans of cat food to third-party sellers on Amazon.com. She posted on a local social-media group asking if anyone wanted to trade the cat-food brands her cats didn’t like, but no dice. Ms. Crisp even bought the food her 3-year-old cats Dosa and Sambar used to eat, but they turned their back after barely sniffing it.

“It’s breaking the bank to do it the Amazon way, but they are my babies,” Ms. Crisp said.

Zachary Whitten, who takes care of four cats and some strays with his wife in Memphis, Tenn., has tried serving healthier, more expensive food—which is more often available in stores—to his pets. He has also mixed dry food with wet brands to make it last longer.

The cats, who typically run around the house and meow in excitement near meal time, took just a few bites, he said. They looked at the food, sniffed it then wandered away before returning to reluctantly finish their bowls.

“Some of the cats have lost a pound or two just because they haven’t been getting consistent food,” Mr. Whitten said. “It’s been a waking nightmare.”

In Dallas, Vase Jones cooked beef and white rice for her 4-year-old Maltese-miniature pinscher mix when she couldn’t find dog food at the end of October. Cookie scrutinized the food, took a bite and walked away.

Ms. Jones, a public-relations manager, tried cooking chicken and salmon with rice instead. In the end, she said, “sometimes she just ate whatever I ate.”

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HEADLINE	12/21 Study finds plastic in ‘clean’ air
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/21/no-mountain-high-enough-study-finds-plastic-in-clean-air

GIST	<p>From Mount Everest to the Mariana Trench, microplastics are everywhere – even high in the Earth’s troposphere where wind speeds allow them to travel vast distances, a new study has found.</p> <p>Microplastics are tiny fragments – measuring less than 5mm – that come from packaging, clothing, vehicles and other sources and have been detected on land, in water and in the air.</p> <p>Scientists from the French national research institute CNRS sampled air 2,877 metres above sea level at the Pic du Midi Observatory in the French Pyrenees, a so-called “clean station” because of the limited influence exerted on it by the local climate and environment.</p> <p>There they tested 10,000 cubic metres of air a week between June and October of 2017 and found all samples contained microplastics.</p> <p>Using weather data, they calculated the trajectories of different air masses preceding each sample and discovered sources as far away as north Africa and North America.</p> <p>The study’s main author, Steve Allen of Dalhousie University in Canada, told AFP that the particles were able to travel such distances because they were able to reach great altitudes.</p> <p>“Once it hits the troposphere, it’s like a superfast highway,” he said.</p> <p>The research also points to microplastic sources in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.</p> <p>“The marine source is the most interesting,” Allen said.</p> <p>“Plastic leaving the ocean into the air that high – it shows there is no eventual sink for this plastic. It’s just moving around and around in an indefinite cycle.”</p> <p>While the amounts of microplastics in the samples at the Pic du Midi do not pose a health risk, the study’s co-author Deonie Allen notes that the particles are small enough for humans to breathe in.</p> <p>And she says their presence in a zone thought to be protected and far from pollution sources should give pause.</p> <p>“It questions the relationship we have with plastic,” she said, adding that the problem was global.</p> <p>Allen said that it also showed that disposing of plastic by shipping it abroad was a flawed strategy.</p> <p>“It’s going to come back to you,” she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 OD death rate highest w/Native Americans
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/covid-fueled-drug-crisis-native-americans-hit-worst-81887734
GIST	<p>BEMIDJI, Minn. -- The medicine man told her she should soon give her son back to the earth.</p> <p>Rachel Taylor kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the crow sewn onto a leather bag nestled on the couch in the living room. “Oh, my baby,” she whispered, and hugged the buckskin satchel filled with his ashes.</p> <p>Nearly a year ago, she had opened his bedroom door and screamed so loud she woke the neighbor. Kyle Domrese was face down on his bed, one of more than 100,000 Americans lost in a year to overdoses as the COVID-19 pandemic fueled America’s addiction disaster.</p> <p>When he was 4, the medicine man had given him his Ojibwe name: Aandegoons — “little crow.” She traced the outline of the black bird on the sack.</p>

“Love you,” Taylor said to the bag, as she does each time she leaves for work in this city surrounded by three Ojibwe reservations in remote northern Minnesota.

As the pandemic ravaged the country, deaths from drug overdoses surged by nearly 30%, climbing to a record high. The drug crisis has also diversified from an overwhelmingly white affliction to killing people of color with staggering speed. The death rate last year was highest among Native Americans, for whom COVID-19 piled yet more despair on communities already confronting generations of trauma, poverty, unemployment and underfunded health systems.

It is no longer an opioid epidemic, but one in which people are dying from deadly cocktails of many drugs. Deaths involving methamphetamine have nearly tripled in recent years, with Native Americans 12 times more likely to die from it.

As Taylor began her shift at the Northwest Indian Community Development Center, a posterboard propped against the wall was pasted with 49 faces — a collage of their dead to drugs.

Taylor’s tribe, the White Earth Nation, studied of the lives they’ve lost to addiction.

“Their death certificates say they died of an overdose, but that’s not right,” one member of their study group said.

These deaths were a culmination of far more than that: Despite their resilience, Native Americans carry in their blood 500 years worth of pain from being robbed of their land, their language, their culture, their children. In living people’s memory, children were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools with the motto, “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

“What they died of is a broken heart,” the study says.

For years, Taylor tried to break the cycle.

Her grandmother was sent to a Christian boarding school, where she was taught to be so ashamed of her Ojibwe language that she would only speak or sing it after drinking.

Taylor had her daughter when she was 19 and her son a few years later. She lost custody of them for a couple years as she battled her own addiction to opioids and cocaine. She told them she wished she could fix all the dysfunctional things that happened when she was using.

“Then I thought, well, then my mom would have to go back and fix things, and then my grandma would have to go back, it would have to go on like that for generations,” she said.

Taylor had lived in more than 50 places before she turned 18 — foster homes, battered women’s shelters, on the streets — and faced sexual, physical and mental abuse.

“The things I blame on generational trauma are not feeling good enough, not feeling worthy enough, not feeling loved,” she said.

She prayed to her creator to spare her children, and she told her son every day that she loved him.

White Earth Nation too worked hard to save its people from addiction, and many years lost no one to overdoses on the reservation. But then the pandemic arrived and proved too painful for some.

And now in Taylor’s shaking hands, she holds her son’s picture — another face for the posterboard, lost January 11, 2021.

At first, she put his ashes in an urn, but it was sharp metal. A friend made the buckskin bag that she could hug. It's become the center of her world.

He'd always loved to laugh, so Taylor teases the bag of ashes.

"Keep an eye on the cat," she'll say when she leaves the house. Then she tells the cat to keep an eye on him.

The wind churned snow across the prairies, so Dr. Carson Gardner, the medical director of White Earth Nation's health department, told the tale of the Windigo as a metaphor for addiction.

This story of an evil spirit in Ojibwe folklore can only be spoken with snow on the ground as a layer of protection from the monster. The Windigo is a cannibal that sings a song, and anyone who hears it must cover their ears and run away, he said. Otherwise, they develop an insatiable hunger.

"You will first eat everything in your lodge, and when that's gone, you'll eat everything in your neighbors' lodges. When that's gone, you will eat your neighbors. You will finish off by eating yourself," said Gardner.

Their reservation spans more than 800,000 rugged acres of prairie and lakes, dotted with small villages, known for glorious summers and long unforgiving winters. But despite the vast terrain, it's sparsely populated, and they live the belief that all should be loved like family.

"Those who listen to the Windigo song aren't bad people," Gardner said. "They just didn't plug their ears and walk away. They didn't know how powerful the song was."

Rachel Taylor's son once wrote her a letter because he thought his addiction was killing him: "I can't control it. I hope you can forgive me. I'm sorry, I love you, I wanted to spend more time with you."

He'd started abusing pills as a teenager when he got a prescription after having surgery for an infected finger. Then, consumed by the madness of addiction, he would smoke anything — methamphetamine, heroin, fentanyl — that might quiet his lifelong anxiety and depression.

But just before the pandemic bore down, his mother felt hopeful.

She and her son quarantined together at her home in Bemidji, a city of 15,000 people. Her son had gone to treatment, sober 168 days. His cheeks were full again, and he asked her to make his favorite peanut butter cookies.

"I'm glad I still have a chance to make my loving mom proud," he wrote in a journal.

But the months dragged on, and he told her it seemed like the pandemic would never end. He couldn't get a job. He was isolated. He said he felt like a bum.

"He just gave up," she said. He started using again, then dealing drugs to support his habit.

All around them, people were dying. On the White Earth reservation, ambulance calls for overdoses tripled, Gardner said. They posted big red signs in gas stations and tribal buildings: "overdose alert," they said. "Please look out for each other."

Joe Kleszyk, the commander of the region's drug task force, sounded the alarm, too: "An epidemic within a pandemic," he told the local newspaper in August 2020. The task force covers five counties and two reservations, including White Earth.

The number of overdoses it investigated skyrocketed from 20 in 2019 to 88 last year. Fifteen of those were fatal, triple the year before.

It's getting worse: This year, there's been 148 overdoses, and 24 of those victims died.

In Minnesota, as across the country, drug dealers now cut nearly every drug on the street with fentanyl, a cheap and deadly synthetic opioid so potent the equivalent of a sugar packet can make 40 doses, Kleszyk said. "It's a game of Russian roulette," he said.

At the same time, the pandemic pushed many toward addiction, called a "disease of despair."

Unemployment in Indian County surged to 26%. And with the federal government's disinvestment in Native communities, many were already living on the brink of poverty — sometimes just across the street from predominantly white gated communities and summer vacation resorts.

On top of that, the healing traditions many turn to in troubled times, like sweat lodges and talking circles, were suspended. There is a communal culture, and people were suddenly isolated.

Of the 148 overdoses the task force investigated this year, 124 victims were Native.

"I'm sick of telling people that their kids are dead," Kleszyk said.

When officers on the White Earth reservation arrived on Aug. 5, 2020 to deliver the news to Betty Opegard, her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the ground. Her daughter, Beth Renee Hill, a 32-year-old mother of three, died of an overdose involving methamphetamine.

Hill's Ojibwe name, Bebaanimadookwe, is the word for how snow sparkles in the sunshine.

"She was like that, she sparkled in people's lives, she was so beautiful," said Opegard. "She could make a lot happen in a day."

Hill started taking methamphetamine a couple years ago and fell apart fast. She lost custody of her kids and despaired, so she did even more drugs.

Opegard used to wake up each morning and run through the names of her eight children from oldest to youngest, imagining where they were and what they were doing. She forced herself to stop, because when she got to Hill, it felt too much to bear.

For months, Hill's father just held her picture and cried. Now he's buried next to her. He died in January, and Opegard blames a broken heart.

Amid all this death and dying, one of the most urgent questions White Earth and other Native American communities are facing is how to spare the next generations from starting the cycle anew.

Indian health care has been underfunded for decades. When the American government forced Native Americans off their land, it signed treaties with tribes promising to provide for them necessities like health care. The dead from addiction is proof it's never kept its word, said Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith.

The national average for health care spending is just over \$11,000 per person, but tribal health systems receive about a third of that and urban Indian groups even less, according to the National Council of Urban Indian Health. COVID-19 added another blow to this already stressed system.

Smith introduced a bill this summer that would usher \$200 million in grants to Indian organizations to bolster their mental health and addiction treatment. The bill, still stalled in Congress, would empower Native organizations to address addiction their own way.

In the years before the pandemic, the White Earth tribe married western medical interventions with the traditional healing practices that helped their people survive as the government tried to erase them. They trained thousands how to use the overdose-reversal medication naloxone and estimate that's saved 1,000 lives, Gardner said. They saved just as many through the millennia of inherited wisdom: drum circles, tobacco ceremonies, the dark, humid honesty of praying in a sweat lodge to balance their bodies, souls and minds.

Their motto is unconditional love, Gardner said. People can recover if they're given hope and healing, so they don't give up on anybody, no matter how deep their addiction.

Georgianna Garbow-Warren's addiction to methamphetamine for years left her homeless — she and her husband lived in abandoned houses, in shelters, eventually under a bridge. She lost custody of her three children. She felt like she was living in circles: She'd use drugs, get her kids taken, clean up, get them back, start the cycle again.

She grew up on the White Earth reservation near Beth Hill. She can rattle off names of other neighbors they've lost to addiction.

Garbow-Warren had a fourth child in 2019, a son born premature at four pounds, seven ounces. They took him straight from the hospital.

She kept using meth: "I wanted to take all that pain away," she said.

Then she couldn't breathe, went back to the hospital and was diagnosed with congestive heart failure from the damage meth had done. She was in and out of emergency rooms. One day she was lying in bed there and thought: "Oh God, do I really hate myself this much?"

She turned herself into the police on an outstanding warrant, and told them she wanted treatment. It was February 2020, just as the pandemic began brutalizing so many battling addiction.

"This year there's been the most funerals I've been to in my whole life," she said. Her sister was hospitalized in March with liver and kidney infections from drinking and drug use.

She couldn't see when Garbow-Warren visited her. The doctors said she could hear them. They played her favorite song by Sir Mix-A-Lot and she wiggled like she was trying to dance. She died a couple days later.

"I'll never get the image out of my head," she said. One of her sisters is now in treatment, a brother still uses, and she waits for the phone call that he's dead.

Her husband found recovery, too. They got an apartment, a dog, a car, and slowly regained custody of their baby, who has cerebral palsy. He can't crawl, and scoots around on his back.

"I blamed myself. I felt a lot of guilt and shame, a lot of pain," she said, about her son's medical difficulties. Then a doctor told her there was no way to know if it was from her drug use or something else.

She doesn't know about her older children. Her son turned 18 this year, the others are 17 and 10. She sometimes imagines tracking them down, but then wonders if they're better off without her.

"I live with that everyday," she said, "wondering if they're OK."

In January, Rachel Taylor's heart began aching, like someone had reached into her chest and was squeezing it.

"It was like my heart knew before I did," she said. "My heart was broken four days before he even died."

She had an uneasy feeling the morning of Jan. 11. It was quiet in the house and her son's bedroom door was closed.

"Are you awake?" Taylor texted him at 9:21 a.m.

She never wanted to seem overbearing, and she knew it made him happy to think she trusted him. So she vacuumed the living room just outside his bedroom and hoped the commotion would wake him.

Eventually, she opened his door. At first she thought it must be a dream, like she was seeing from outside herself that his skin was purple.

She dialed 911, and the operator said to check his vitals. He was ice cold. She dropped the phone and screamed. "Come back, my baby, come back."

When he was born, the nurse put him on her chest, and he'd looked at her with such intensity. His eyes were always like that, like a cat's, she thinks.

He loved animals. In stacks of photos albums, he's often holding some little creature. She kept everything he ever made her — birthday cards, childhood pottery. "You're the best mom in the world," he'd write, and she loved it because she'd always felt like a bad one.

She knew the hell her son was living because she had lived it, too.

In December 2020, he punched holes in the walls until his fists bled and screamed he wanted to die. She called police, and when officers arrived she stepped in front of her bloody, hysterical son. "Please don't shoot him," she pleaded, "this isn't him."

They took him to a hospital, but he broke a camera, and the hospital kicked him out.

A month later, she watched as they covered him in blue plastic, and begged them to let her kiss his forehead.

The toxicology report said that he'd died of a combination of alprazolam, the drug in Xanax, and fentanyl.

For a time, she didn't want to live.

Then the medicine man took her to a sweat lodge on the reservation. When she came out, the chatter of two cranes on the wind sounded like a crow — a sign from her son. Now she feeds the crows so they'll keep coming to the yard.

She still smells him, she said. She swears she hears his particular way of knocking on the door.

The anniversary of his death is approaching on Jan. 11, and it is customary in her culture to return him to nature after a year of grieving, she said.

But every morning, she kisses his bag. Her daughter took her out for a buffet dinner, and the bag went too. She fixed him a plate of his favorite foods, prime rib, mashed potatoes, she buttered him a bun.

"The medicine man says I have to let him go back to the earth," she said. "But I don't think I'm going to be able to do that. He left me too soon."

Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/21 Police hunt for serial bank robber
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/police-bank-robbery-suspect-believed-to-be-involved-in-several-in-puget-sound-area
GIST	<p>BELLEVUE, Wash. - Multiple law enforcement agencies were involved in a search for a bank robbery suspect in Bellevue on Tuesday.</p> <p>The robbery was called in around 3:20 p.m. at the Columbia Bank at 10350 NE 10th St. The suspect allegedly handed the bank teller a note.</p> <p>"The suspect vehicle and the suspect match the description of a series of bank robberies in the Puget Sound areas," said spokesperson Meeghan Black of Bellevue Police Department. "So officers immediately responded, and the suspect took off in a black vehicle, sped recklessly through town and we attempted to stop him and pull him over, and he alluded police."</p> <p>The suspect eventually abandoned his vehicle in the area of Kelsey Creek Park and ran away on foot. Police set up a large perimeter in the neighborhood for several hours, using drones and K-9's to track the suspect.</p> <p>"We do have our K-9's out. We have our unmanned-aerial systems out, two of them, searching the area. We have officers out on foot tracking scents so we are actively looking for this individual," said Black. "If you see anything or hear anything out of the ordinary please call 911. Do not approach the suspect. We do consider him to be potentially armed and dangerous."</p> <p>The suspect was described as being mixed-race, in his mid-twenties, about 6'2 and medium build. He was last seen wearing a black face covering, white gloves and a yellow construction vest according to police.</p> <p>Police called off the search after several hours. If you see or hear anything suspicious, you're asked to get in touch with Bellevue Police or call 911 immediately.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/22 'Koala massacre' prompts cruelty charges
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/22/australia/australia-koala-killing-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) Australian authorities on Wednesday charged a landowner and two companies with more than 250 counts of animal cruelty over the deaths of dozens of koalas during a clearance operation last year.</p> <p>According to a statement from Victoria state's Conservation Regulator, 21 koalas were found dead and dozens more injured at a timber plantation in Cape Bridgewater, about 377 kilometers (234 miles) southwest of the state capital, Melbourne, in February 2020.</p> <p>Authorities euthanized 49 of the wounded koalas, with many suffering from starvation, dehydration and fractures, the statement said.</p> <p>A man and an earthmoving company are accused of causing "unreasonable pain or suffering to dozens of koalas," the statement said. "They are also charged with destroying koalas which are a protected species."</p> <p>They face a total of 126 charges each, including 18 aggravated cruelty charges for allegedly causing fatal injuries.</p> <p>One cruelty charge was laid against a separate contracting business for allegedly disturbing the koala population. The statement did not name those accused.</p>

The maximum penalty for one charge of animal cruelty is nearly \$78,000 for a business and more than \$32,000 or 12 months' jail for an individual.

In a statement at the time, Conservation group Friends of the Earth Australia called the incident a "koala massacre," adding it was "alarmed that such wanton destruction and widespread death and injuries continue to plague the south west Victorian plantation industry."

Threats to koalas

Koalas are a protected species in Australia and face a [number of threats](#) to their survival.

The country's koala population suffered severe losses during the catastrophic [bushfires](#) of 2019, which destroyed more than 12 million acres (48,000 square kilometers) of land across the state of New South Wales alone.

More than 60,000 koalas either died, lost their habitat or suffered injury from the flames, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

Experts say the species is also facing localized extinctions because of the threat of chlamydia, which causes blindness and painful cysts in a koala's reproductive tract that may lead to infertility or death.

The climate crisis has made koalas more susceptible to the disease. Chlamydia spreads more quickly through their population under stressful environmental conditions, including hot weather, drought and habitat loss, according to the Australian government.

In mid-2021, an Australian government report on the conservation status of koalas recommended the animal's status be changed to "endangered" in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, as a result of the rapid population decline in those areas.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Wore wire, risked life: expose those in KKK
SOURCE	https://federalnewsnetwork.com/government-news/2021/12/he-wore-a-wire-risked-his-life-to-expose-who-was-in-the-klk/
GIST	<p>Jacksonville, Fla. (AP) — For nearly 10 years, Joseph Moore lived a secret double life.</p> <p>At times the U.S. Army veteran donned a white robe and hood as a hit man for the Ku Klux Klan. He attended clandestine meetings and participated in cross burnings. He even helped plan the murder of a Black man.</p> <p>However, Moore wore something else during his years in the klan — a wire for the FBI. He recorded his conversations with his fellow klansmen, and shared what he learned with federal agents trying to crack down on white supremacists in Florida law enforcement.</p> <p>One minor mistake, one tell, he believed, meant a certain, violent death.</p> <p>“I had to realize that this man would shoot me in the face in a heartbeat,” Moore said in a deep, slow drawl, remembering a particularly scary meeting in 2015. But it was true of many of his days.</p> <p>The married father of four helped the federal government foil at least two murder plots, according to court records. He was also an active informant when the FBI exposed klan members working as law enforcement officers in Florida at the city, county and state levels.</p> <p>Today, he and his family live under new names. Apart from testifying in court, the 50-year-old has never discussed his undercover work in the KKK publicly. But he reached out to a reporter after The Associated</p>

Press published a series of stories about white supremacists working in Florida's prisons that were based, in part, on records and recordings detailing his work with the FBI.

"The FBI wanted me to gather as much information about these individuals and confirm their identities," Moore said of law enforcement officers who were involved with the klan.

"From where I sat ... it is more prevalent and consequential than any of them are willing to admit."

The FBI first asked Moore to infiltrate a klan group in rural north Florida in 2007.

Moore said he came across dozens of police officers, prison guards, sheriff deputies and other law enforcement officers who were involved with the klan and outlaw motorcycle clubs.

He alerted the feds to a plot to murder a Hispanic truck driver, he said. Then he pointed the FBI toward a deputy with the Alachua County Sheriff's Office who was a member of the same group. The FBI also identified a member of the klan cell working for the Fruitland Park, Florida, police department.

His years as an informant occurred during a critical time for the nation's domestic terrorism efforts. In 2006, the FBI had circulated an intelligence assessment about the klan and other groups trying to infiltrate law enforcement ranks. The assessment said some in law enforcement were volunteering "professional resources to white supremacist causes with which they sympathize."

The FBI did not answer a series of questions sent by the AP about Moore's work.

Moore said he joined the klan only after the government approached him. As a U.S. Army-trained sniper, he said he felt that if his country asked him to protect the public from domestic terrorists, he had a duty .

Moore said he never shared the klan's racist views and never used racial slurs while under cover. On FBI recordings reviewed by the AP, he was never heard using racial slurs like his former klan brothers.

But he also acknowledges that successful undercover work required him to change into a wholly different person.

"I laid out a character that had been overseas. That had received medals in combat," Moore said. "That had special operations experience — more experience than I had. But someone that they would feel confident would be a useful asset to the organization at a much higher level."

It worked, and Moore was given high level access.

"If you're not credible, if you're not engaged on all levels, you don't get to go home to your family," he said.

It also required Moore to lie to his wife. Eventually she became suspicious and he cracked. He told her and her parents what he was doing.

When the FBI discovered that his wife knew, they ended the relationship with the agency.

But in 2013, the agency was back, asking him to infiltrate a different Florida klan chapter.

Within a year of becoming "naturalized," he'd become a Grand Knight Hawk of the "klavern" based in rural north central Florida. He was in charge of security, and the go-to guy for violence.

It was at a cross-burning ceremony in December 2014 that Charles Newcomb, the "Exalted Cyclops" of the chapter, pulled him aside to discuss a scheme to kill a Black man. Warren Williams was a former inmate who'd gotten into a fight with one of their klan brothers. The klansmen wanted Williams dead.

Moore alerted the FBI. He then recorded discussions of the murder plot that would lead to criminal convictions for three klansmen.

Moore said the three former prison guards implicated in the murder plot operated among a group of other officer-klan members at the Reception and Medical Center in Lake Butler, Florida, a prison where new inmates are processed. He said the officers he knew were actively recruiting at the prison.

Florida's Department of Corrections disputes that.

"Every day more than 18,000 correctional officers throughout the state work as public servants, committed to the safety of Florida's communities. They should not be defamed by the isolated actions of three individuals who committed abhorrent and illegal acts several years prior," the department said in an emailed statement.

Spokeswoman Michelle Gladly has told AP the agency found no evidence of a wider membership by extremist white supremacist groups, or a systemic problem. She said every allegation of wrongdoing is investigated by the department's inspector general.

"That statement by the state is not accurate," said Moore, who asserts he saw evidence of a more pervasive problem.

After Moore testified in that case, his FBI work ended because he'd been publicly identified.

"I was on track to uncover more activity in law enforcement, but the immediate threat to the public with the murder plot was a priority," Moore said.

He went public now because he does not want his work, and those of other confidential informants who put their lives on the line to help expose domestic extremists, to have been in vain.

He wants corrections and law enforcement leaders to root out white supremacists and other violent extremists.

"If you want to know why people don't trust the police, it's because they have a relative or friend that they witness being targeted by an extremist who happens to have a badge and a gun. And I know as a fact that this has occurred. I stopped a murder plot of law enforcement officers," said Moore.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Bellevue prostitution sting nets 16 arrests
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/16-arrested-in-bellevue-prostitution-sting
GIST	<p>BELLEVUE, Wash. - 16 men were arrested in a one-night undercover prostitution sting in Bellevue.</p> <p>Bellevue Police say they were running an 'uncover vice operation,' targeting a recent demand in prostitution. Investigators posed as prostitutes on an online dating app and then arrange to meet with men at a Bellevue motel.</p> <p>One suspect in particular had previously given statements to police saying he wanted to kill a prostitute. When he was arrested at the motel, detectives found two guns in his waistband.</p> <p>The sting was carried out in a single night, and 16 men were arrested.</p> <p>"Prostitution is not a victimless crime. Many sex workers become victims of robbery, assault and rape," said Cpt. Shelby Shearer. "But in this case, we very easily could have prevented something bad from happening."</p> <p>Police say the suspects agreed to pay between \$80-\$280 for sex, and many brought sex paraphernalia, alcohol and narcotics.</p>

	<p>"Any comprehensive approach to combating human trafficking must include dealing with the demand, which is why we conduct the vice stings," said Shearer. "We want to send the clear message to these suspects, don't engage in prostitution, and certainly don't do it in Bellevue."</p> <p>Patronizing a prostitute is a misdemeanor, and suspects are required to attend a 10-week 'Stopping Sexual Exploitation' program.</p> <p>"Our ongoing investigations show that countless people are being trafficked and commercially sexually exploited in the City of Bellevue. We have identified children, domestic violence victims, foreign nationals, and other highly vulnerable and marginalized people who are being harmed through the illicit sex trade," said Shearer. "We continue to identify these victims and try to connect them with services. We remain steadfast in addressing the demand for commercial sex, which fuels the sex trafficking industry. We will continue to hold sex buyers accountable for the harm they are perpetuating in the community."</p> <p>If you or someone you know is a victim of human sex or labor trafficking, you are encouraged to contact Bellevue Police at ViceHT@bellevuewa.gov. Call 911 if you are in immediate danger.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 Italy police seize Boeing 787 parts in probe
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/italy-police-seize-parts-in-boeing-787-subcontractor-probe/
GIST	<p>Italian authorities seized components used to manufacture fuselages for Boeing's 787 jets at Leonardo SpA's plant in Grottaglie, Ansa newswire reported.</p> <p>The parts were produced by MPS, subcontractors of Leonardo, one of Boeing's largest Dreamliner parts suppliers, the newswire said. The components were allegedly produced using titanium and aluminum that didn't comply in quality and origin with contracted terms.</p> <p>In October, Boeing found that titanium components used by Leonardo didn't meet specifications and would need to be replaced on some aircraft made in the past three years. The flawed parts included titanium spacers, brackets and clips used in sections of the carbon-composite airframe, people familiar with the matter told Bloomberg News.</p> <p>Leonardo said at the time that it had dropped MPS, which is also known as Manufacturing Process Specification Srl, as a supplier. The Rome-based manufacturer called itself the "injured party" in the matter, and said it wouldn't bear costs associated with the titanium-fastener issue.</p> <p>A Leonardo spokesman declined to comment on Saturday's Ansa report. Finance police in Brindisi, which carried out the raid, weren't immediately available to comment.</p> <p>Prosecutors in southern Italy started an investigation into the supply of parts to Boeing by MPS, Reuters reported on Nov. 5, citing people familiar with the matter.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/21 US, Brazil stop neo-Nazis NYE attack plot
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/dhs/ice-hsi-brazilian-police-stop-neo-nazi-plans-for-new-years-eve-mass-casualty-attack/
GIST	<p>Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations worked with Brazilian authorities to stop neo-Nazis from planning and executing a mass-casualty attack on New Year's Eve in São Paulo.</p> <p>According to Brazil's Ministry of Justice and Public Security, four arrest warrants and 31 search-and-seizure warrants were executed Thursday in the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul as part of Operation Bergon, which targeted antisemites and neo-Nazis networking online and threatening acts of violence.</p>

The operation, which was launched in May in response to neo-Nazi groups using online platforms based in the United States to stoke violence against Jewish and black civilians, was named for Sister Denise Bergon, a French nun who saved 83 Jewish children from the Nazis during World War II. She was honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations in 1980.

The neo-Nazi activity was monitored by Brazil's Secretariat of Integrated Operations' Cyber Operations Laboratory and critical information was shared with U.S. counterparts at HSI at the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia between May and November.

"While executing the search warrants, Brazil police found homemade explosives, weapons, Nazi paraphernalia, and detailed plans of future attacks," ICE said of the raids. "One of the perpetrators later stated that he was planning to use these explosives during a New Year's celebration in the state of São Paulo."

HSI Brasilia shared information with Brazilian authorities at the outset of the investigation about "multiple planned mass casualty attacks at local schools and other public locations throughout Brazil." Rio de Janeiro Civil Police then arrested a suspect on May 12 who reportedly had electronic devices that yielded information about potential targets and networking among extremists.

"Through continued investigative collaboration, members of dangerous anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi cells were apprehended before they caused a possible mass casualty event," said HSI Brasilia Acting Attaché Patrick Chen. "The success of Operation Bergón is a prime example of the importance of international partnerships in dismantling criminal organizations that threaten public safety and innocent lives."

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HEADLINE	12/21 King Co. prosecutor's office 'peel back veil'
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3289144/king-county-prosecutor-peel-back-veil-tumultuous-year-2021/
GIST	<p>Nearly two years into the pandemic, we've all seen a lot of change, including some of the negative apparent side effects of the pandemic, from kids struggling with their education and mental health, to the loss of businesses and the loss of life. The pandemic has taken a toll on everything in one way or another, including public safety.</p> <p>With all of the rhetoric on that issue — combined with a genuine public need — the King County prosecutor's office took action over this last year to give all of us the ability to cut through the noise.</p> <p>"We're the first prosecuting attorney's office that we're aware of to launch a public data dashboard that gives the public insight into our work, demanding increased transparency and accountability from government as they should be," King County Prosecutor's Office spokesperson Douglas Wagoner told KIRO Radio. "This is one step that we took to let folks know how we're working to keep them safe and hold folks accountable every single day."</p> <p>Wagoner says the dashboard puts all the answers right at the fingertips of King County residents, as a way to "peel back the veil and let folks see for themselves" how cases are investigated and referred, and then later charged or declined. The website housing the dashboard also includes a video walking users through what can be a "very confusing" process for the average person to understand.</p> <p>This comes while the King County Prosecutor's Office worked to clear an historic backlog of cases that was exacerbated by a year of not having in-person trials due to the pandemic.</p> <p>"This backlog is in no way unique to King County," Wagoner clarified. "Every major jurisdiction in the country and minor ones as well are experiencing a massive historic backlog of court cases, which is super concerning and was one of the reasons we thought releasing the dashboard when we did was so important, because the first part of the dashboard shows folks the backlog, the number of open cases that are awaiting disposition."</p>

“And this past year in King County, we took steps to reduce that backlog,” he added.

That has eventually paid off in the form of more staff to help start closing some of those cases, which over the past several months, they’ve been able to make some headway on.

Hate crimes

The pandemic also saw increases in the number of hate crimes being reported, with a group of deputy prosecutors taking it upon themselves to form an outreach team.

“That was something that they did voluntarily — it’s not an official part of their work, but they got together, saw that hate crimes were up in our community, and that it was really important,” Wagoner explained.

In total, King County filed 53 hate crime charges in 2021. That was a process helped along by the outreach team’s work with the community and law enforcement.

“I’m so proud that our team got out there proactively talking to community groups and talking to law enforcement, to help increase the number of people that are aware and feel comfortable, and feel like they have the community connections in place to be able to report a hate crime and get the accountability they’re looking for,” Wagoner said.

Changes to three-strikes sentencing

Another major milestone for the prosecutor’s office was following through on a major change to the state’s three strikes law passed by the Legislature.

“We had a banner year for justice reform when it comes to resentencing people that are serving a three strike sentence in Washington state,” Wagoner described.

That came in the form of Senate Bill 5164, which requires prosecutors across the state to resentence individuals serving a three strikes life sentence due to a second-degree robbery charge. The change came about given the fact that second-degree robbery is the lowest on the list of potential three-strike sentences, and was proving to be a racially disproportionate charge.

In King County alone, there were around 20 people serving a three-strikes life sentence stemming from second-degree robbery, all of whom were awaiting resentencing following the passage of SB 5164. Now, the prosecutor’s office has policies in place to ensure those people can transition back into freedom successfully after years in prison.

Juvenile justice and diversionary programs

The King County Prosecutor’s Office also made significant progress on its juvenile justice reform.

“For the third year in a row, we diverted more juvenile cases than we filed through the court system,” Wagoner said. “We’ve been emphasizing innovative practice, restorative justice, therapeutic approaches in the juvenile justice space for years now, and it’s really paying off as a result of our efforts and others in King County.”

The county has now reached an “historic low” with 22 kids in secure detention, down from 205 in 2000.

But not everyone agrees with that “no youth jail” philosophy, and want to know what metrics there are to show them that this method actually works to keep young people out of trouble and the public safe.

To that end, Wagoner cites a study from 2014, which showed that young people moving through the county’s Choose 180 diversionary program were less likely to commit another crime than those who moved through the traditional court and detention system.

“The choice is not either jail or nothing — these are restorative forms of accountability,” Wagoner said. “It’s a different type of accountability that doesn’t rely on incarcerating our kids.”

“They’re not 100% bulletproof,” he added. “But I would also say that people get out of jail all the time and go on to commit other crimes. I just think, especially when it comes to investing in our young people and their future, shrinking the number of kids to the lowest number that’s humanly possible who are incarcerated is in our best interest, and it’s in the best interest of our kids.”

Dealing with dangerous criminals

One of the more unfortunate milestones to make the list comes in from a specialized unit that deals with the most dangerous criminals.

The prosecutor’s office has a unit called the Most Dangerous Offenders Project, operating on-call 24 hours a day responding to homicide cases. In 2021, they responded to 135 calls, leading to 62 murder and manslaughter charges.

“There’s a unit called the most dangerous offenders project, they are on call 24 hours a day responding to homicides and attempted attempted homicides. Just highlighting their work. They responded to 135 calls this year when they went directly to crime scenes, which is a huge, unfortunate number of violence in our community. As a result, we filed 62 murder and manslaughter charges.”

This came amid a year where gun violence soared to record levels according to shots fired data from the county. To address that, the prosecutor’s office worked with the county council on prevention and intervention community partnerships, while using Choose 180 “to leverage the gun violence data analysis that we do in our office to prioritize community engagement with folks who are most at risk of firearm violence.”

Drug diversion, fentanyl, and street racing

The office saw a lot of success with another diversion program too, aimed at providing substance abuse treatment to those who needed it most.

“Every single month in King County, we celebrated a new class of King County Drug Diversion Court graduates, who are eligible for this diversion option based on their substance use and the nature of the crime that they committed,” Wagoner detailed. “By going through this really rigorous, almost year-long program, they’re able to get their charges expunged, but more more importantly, they’re able to get the substance use treatment they need so they don’t continue to commit crimes fueled by drug addiction.”

The prosecutor’s office has prioritized the fight against a record number of fentanyl-related overdoses as well, having implemented what Wagoner described as a “novel,” yet useful strategy.

“We charged fentanyl dealers ... with the somewhat novel charge of controlled substance homicide, which is when we can connect the drug dealer to individuals who actually died from overdoses,” he explained.

Wagner says they also boosted their efforts cracking down on street racing crimes, thanks to a regional task force formed in May of 2021. That task force led to the arrest and charging of an individual who had organized multiple racing events, one of which resulted in the death of two young women.

The road ahead

Beyond all of that, the prosecutor’s office is always busy with day-to-day work.

“Every single day, our office files roughly 25 felony cases,” Wagoner noted. “These are really the highest level crimes, the most serious and extreme crimes that we see in King County. When we share this list publicly, folks will be able to see the daily charging rundowns that we do periodically, so that folks can really see and experience our work for themselves.”

Looking ahead to 2022, you can expect much more as the prosecutor's office looks to focus on a victim-centered approach, with a push for victims bill of rights in Olympia. They also still have a significant number of backlog cases to get through in a process prosecutor Sandberg expects to take years.

On top of all of that, the King County Prosecutor's Office will also be taking on the first Washington law enforcement officer to be charged with murder under I-940 to trial, when Auburn police officer Jeff Nelson [goes on trial for the murder of Jesse Sarey](#). A status hearing for that case is expected in January of 2022, with the trial itself set for the following month.

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HEADLINE	12/21 DOJ: some inmates stay home confinement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/us/politics/prison-covid-home-confinement.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Justice Department moved on Tuesday to allow certain federal inmates to remain on home confinement when the government declares an end to the Covid emergency, reversing a Trump-era legal opinion that said the Bureau of Prisons would have to recall them to federal facilities.</p> <p>The unusual shift was a rare instance when the department under Attorney General Merrick B. Garland reversed a high-profile Trump-era decision. It was also a victory for criminal justice advocates.</p> <p>“Thousands of people on home confinement have reconnected with their families, have found gainful employment and have followed the rules,” Mr. Garland said in a statement.</p> <p>Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman, said in a statement that President Biden also welcomed the change, noting “the relief it will mean for thousands of individuals on home confinement who have worked hard toward rehabilitation and are contributing to their communities.”</p> <p>Congress gave the Bureau of Prisons the authority to release federal inmates to home confinement as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, passed in March 2020 to address threats posed by the coronavirus pandemic, including risks to people in overcrowded prisons.</p> <p>But five days before Mr. Biden took office in January, the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel determined that nearly all those people would need to return to prison once the government said the pandemic no longer constituted an emergency.</p> <p>Criminal justice advocates and some lawmakers — including Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois Democrat and the chairman of the Judiciary Committee — pressed the new administration to reverse course. But in July, The New York Times reported that Biden administration lawyers had decided that the Trump-era memo had correctly interpreted the law.</p> <p>During a trip to Chicago days later, Mr. Durbin lobbied Mr. Garland to become personally involved, according to a person familiar with the matter. The next month, administration officials characterized the previous assessment as a preliminary review and said that a more formal one was underway.</p> <p>As an alternative to keep some inmates on home confinement from returning to prison, the White House worked on a clemency program for some nonviolent drug offenders and considered using compassionate release for others.</p> <p>Criminal justice advocates, deeming those plans inadequate, on Nov. 30 pushed White House officials including Susan E. Rice, the domestic policy adviser, to reconsider the Trump-era memo.</p> <p>Of the approximately 4,900 inmates placed on home confinement under the CARES Act, about 2,800 would return to prison if the coronavirus emergency were to end, according to Justice Department estimates.</p>

“We will exercise our authority so that those who have made rehabilitative progress and complied with the conditions of home confinement, and who in the interests of justice should be given an opportunity to continue transitioning back to society, are not unnecessarily returned to prison,” Mr. Garland said.

A Justice Department spokeswoman confirmed that the attorney general had asked the Office of Legal Counsel to reconsider its memo.

Christopher H. Schroeder, who took over the office in late October, signed the replacement [memo](#), concluding that it was a “better” interpretation of the law.

Mr. Garland called Mr. Durbin and inmate advocates on Tuesday to inform them of the reversal.

Holly Harris, the president and executive director of Justice Action Network, a bipartisan criminal justice reform group, hailed the change. Mr. Garland said in a conversation with her that the new opinion was the legally correct conclusion; she called it a morally correct one.

“People have gotten jobs and reconnected with their children,” Ms. Harris said. “The relief they have to be feeling right now is overwhelming.”

The Trump-era memo had created a state of dread for people like Wendy Hechtman, who has more than eight years left in her sentence for producing a chemical analogue of fentanyl.

“There’s so many families out there that were really just petrified,” said Ms. Hechtman, who feared telling her sons she would need to return to prison. “I’m just so relieved that I don’t have to hurt them unnecessarily again.”

The new memo gives the Bureau of Prisons “discretion to permit prisoners in extended home confinement to remain there,” a decision that still leaves life for inmates in the hands of the Justice Department, said Udi Ofer, the director of the A.C.L.U.’s justice division.

The Justice Department has declined to reverse some high-profile Trump-era legal decisions, continuing to keep secret a memo related to how William P. Barr, the former attorney general, interpreted the findings of the [special counsel’s report on Russian election interference](#) and to [defend President Donald J. Trump](#) in a defamation suit filed by the writer E. Jean Carroll.

But the Justice Department under Mr. Garland has reversed course from the Trump administration on law enforcement and criminal justice issues. [Mr. Garland imposed a moratorium on federal executions](#) pending a review of the department’s policies and procedures. And he [rescinded a policy that curbed the use of consent decrees](#) to address police misconduct.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Miami airport: 2 arrests; assaulting police
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/us/miami-airport-fight-brawl-video.html
GIST	<p>MIAMI — Two men were arrested after the authorities said they clashed with police officers on Monday at Miami International Airport, which is expecting a record number of passengers for the holiday season.</p> <p>The men — Mayfrer Gregorio Serranopaca, 30, of Kissimmee, Fla., and Alberto YanezSuarez, 32, of Odessa, Texas — were each charged with battery on a law enforcement officer, according to the Miami-Dade Police Department, which is investigating the episode. Mr. Serranopaca also faces additional charges, including resisting an officer with violence and inciting a riot.</p> <p>Mr. Serranopaca and Mr. YanezSuarez could not be reached on Tuesday. It was not immediately clear if the men had lawyers.</p>

The skirmish, which was captured on [a cellphone video](#) that circulated widely on social media, took place at about 6:30 p.m. Monday, when officers responded to a call from an airport employee about a disturbance at Gate H8.

The employee told police officers that he was driving a transport cart when an “unruly passenger refused to let him through,” according to an arrest report. The man, later identified as Mr. Serranopaca, “entered the cart, broke the key and refused to exit the cart,” the report said. The airport worker told the police that the passenger was complaining in Spanish about a delayed flight.

As the officers tried to calm Mr. Serranopaca, a physical confrontation ensued, attracting a large crowd. The video showed a chaotic crowd of travelers surrounding an officer who appeared to restrain Mr. Serranopaca with his arms. When the officer released him from a hold, the two scuffled.

At one point, the officer and Mr. Serranopaca separated, and Mr. Serranopaca charged at the officer, his arms flailing.

The video shows the officer breaking away, stepping back and drawing a firearm. As officers tried to arrest Mr. Serranopaca, the police said that Mr. YanezSuarez was “grabbing and pulling officers” off him.

Firefighters also responded to the scene after Mr. Serranopaca bit one officer on the head, the police said. Mr. Serranopaca and Mr. YanezSuarez were both arrested.

The altercation took place as airports across the country are experiencing heavy holiday traffic. Covid-19 cases have surged, driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, leading some people to rethink their holiday plans, but [millions of travelers are forging ahead](#).

More than 109 million Americans [are expected](#) to travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2, a 34 percent increase from last year, according to AAA. The number of airline passengers alone is projected to rise 184 percent from last year.

“Like airports across the country, MIA is seeing record-high passenger numbers this winter travel season,” Ralph Cutié, the director and chief executive officer of Miami International Airport, said in a statement.

The Miami airport said it expected [about 2.6 million travelers](#) — an average of about 156,000 per day — to pass through its gates from Tuesday through Jan. 6, an increase of 6 percent over the same period in 2019.

“Unfortunately, that passenger growth has come with a record-high increase nationwide in bad behavior as well,” Mr. Cutié said, noting the altercation at the airport on Monday.

Disruptive passengers could face arrest, civil penalties up to \$37,000, being barred from flying and possible federal prosecution, Mr. Cutié said.

He urged people to travel responsibly “by getting to the airport extra early, being patient, complying with the federal mask law and airport staff, limiting your alcohol consumption and notifying police at the first sign of bad behavior by calling 911.”

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HEADLINE	12/21 Jury finds top scientist guilty: China ties
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/science/charles-lieber.html
GIST	BOSTON — Charles Lieber, one of the country’s top research chemists, sat miserably in a chair at the Harvard Police Department, trying to explain to two F.B.I. agents why he had agreed to partner with a lesser-known Chinese university in a relationship that had soured and landed him in trouble with the U.S. government .

The university had money to spend — “that’s one of the things China uses to try to seduce people,” Dr. Lieber said in the interrogation, clips of which were shown in court.

But money wasn’t the reason, he said. By training young scientists in the use of technology he had pioneered, he hoped to burnish his credentials with the committee that decides the ultimate scientific honor.

“This is embarrassing,” he said. “Every scientist wants to win a Nobel Prize.”

On Tuesday, after deliberating for two hours and 45 minutes, a federal jury found Dr. Lieber guilty of two counts of making false statements to the U.S. government about whether he participated in Thousand Talents Plan, [a program designed by the Chinese government to attract foreign-educated scientists to China](#). They also found him guilty of failing to declare income earned in China and failing to report a Chinese bank account.

No date has been set for sentencing. A charge of making false statements carries a maximum sentence of five years. Dr. Lieber, who has cancer, sat expressionless through the six-day trial and said nothing as he left the courthouse with his wife.

Though it is not illegal to participate in Chinese recruitment programs, scientists are required to disclose their participation to the U.S. government, which also funds their research and may view it as a conflict of interest.

Dr. Lieber’s conviction is a victory for the [China Initiative](#), an effort launched in 2018, under the Trump administration, to root out scientists suspected of sharing sensitive information with China.

“Mr. Lieber exploited the openness and transparency of our academic system,” said Joseph Bonavolonta, who heads the Boston division of the F.B.I. “The F.B.I. will not hesitate to work with our law enforcement partners to focus on those who put their financial and professional interests ahead of our country’s economic prosperity.”

Among the cases opened against academic researchers, most, like the case against Dr. Lieber, do not allege espionage or intellectual property theft, but failure to disclose Chinese funding, and the effort has been criticized for prosecutorial overreach.

It suffered a series of setbacks over the summer, with half a dozen cases dismissed and the first case to reach the trial stage, against the researcher Anming Hu, ending in acquittal. Dr. Lieber’s trial was watched closely in scientific circles, as an indicator of whether the Justice Department will proceed with prosecutions of other researchers.

Peter Zeidenberg, a Washington, D.C. lawyer who represents around a dozen researchers who are under investigation, said Dr. Lieber’s case stands out because he was specifically asked about his participation in the Chinese program, and denied it.

“The reason people like Lieber lie is because they are afraid,” he said. “It’s really sad. They are afraid to answer truthfully, ‘Are you a member of the talent program?’ I’m sure during the Red Scare, people said they were not a member of the Communist Party.”

In closing arguments on Tuesday, Dr. Lieber’s lawyer, Marc Mukasey, said the government had inadequate proof of wrongdoing and risked silencing a pioneering researcher.

“Isn’t it troubling that nobody in this courtroom has explained what the Thousand Talents Plan is and who is in it?” he said. “Isn’t it troubling that Dr. Lieber’s work was all public, was for the benefit of the world, yet he is facing criminal charges for it?”

He added, “No villains, no victims, no one got robbed, no one got rich, but over a few seconds of conversation — Special Agent Mousseau called it a blip on the radar — the world’s greatest nanoscientist is facing multiple felonies.”

Among the researchers prosecuted as part of the China Initiative, Dr. Lieber is by far the most prominent, chosen as chairman of Harvard’s chemistry and chemical biology department and seen by some as a potential Nobel Prize winner.

Since 2008, prosecutors said, his laboratory at Harvard had received research grants totaling \$18 million from the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health.

At issue in this case was a joint venture that Dr. Lieber launched in 2011 with the Wuhan University of Technology, where one of his former students had taken a post. Outside employment is standard for high-level researchers, who often contract with private sector firms or universities overseas for part of the academic year.

A three-year contract emailed to Dr. Lieber in 2012, and displayed to the jury by prosecutors, identified him as a “One Thousand Talent High Level Foreign Expert,” entitling him to \$50,000 a month, plus about \$150,000 in living expenses and more than \$1.5 million for a [laboratory](#), which they called the WUT-Harvard Joint Nano Key Laboratory.

In 2018, as the China Initiative got underway, investigators from the Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health approached Dr. Lieber to ask if he had taken part in the Thousand Talents programs. Over the weeklong trial, jurors heard from a series of witnesses who said that in both instances, Dr. Lieber had denied participating.

They also watched video clips from an F.B.I. interrogation, conducted on Jan. 28, 2020, the morning Dr. Lieber was arrested at 6:30 a.m. at his office at Harvard.

After initially asking for a lawyer, Dr. Lieber went on to answer the agents’ questions for about three hours, acknowledging at several points that he had misled investigators.

At first, he denied receiving income from the Wuhan university or participating in the Chinese recruitment program. Then the agents produced a series of documents, including contracts from 2011 and 2012, and Dr. Lieber examined them, remarking at one point, “I should pay more attention to what I’m signing.”

“That’s pretty damning,” he said. “Now that you bring it up, yes, I do remember.”

He went on to offer detail about his financial arrangements with the Wuhan university: A portion of his salary was deposited in a Chinese bank account and the remainder — an amount he estimated as between \$50,000 and \$100,000 — was paid in \$100 bills, which he carried home in his luggage.

“They would give me a package, a brown thing with some Chinese characters on it, I would throw it in my bag,” he said. After returning home, he said, “I didn’t declare it, and that’s illegal.”

He acknowledged, as well, that he “wasn’t completely transparent by any stretch of the imagination” when approached by investigators from the Department of Defense in 2018, and that he was aware he might face charges.

“I was scared of being arrested, like I am now,” he added.

As the jury prepared to deliberate, Jason Casey, an assistant U.S. attorney, reminded jurors of Dr. Lieber’s demeanor in the F.B.I. interview and urged them to “use your common sense.”

“It’s not that the defendant has no memory,” he said. “He does not want to remember because he knows that he agreed that contract, that he participated in the Thousand Talents program, that he took bags of cash on an airplane and never reported them to the I.R.S.”

‘Scaring the scientific community’

Dr. Lieber’s arrest was one of the first signals that federal authorities were investigating scientists who had received funding from Chinese sources, and it sent shock waves through academic circles.

It was followed, in January of 2021, by the arrest of Gang Chen, a professor of mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on suspicion of hiding affiliations with Chinese government institutions in order to secure \$19 million in U.S. federal grants.

Brian Timko, who worked under Dr. Lieber as a graduate student and now heads his own laboratory at Tufts University, said he believed China Initiative had strayed from its original focus on espionage toward disclosure violations that, a few years ago, “would have been handled at the university level.”

“I think these cases are about scaring the scientific community,” he said.

Dr. Timko, who attended stretches of the weeklong trial, said he was troubled by the way Dr. Lieber’s work had been “twisted” by prosecutors.

He said Dr. Lieber had invented electronic chips so small and flexible that they could be injected into parts of the human body, like the brain or the retina. Eventually, he said, the technology could lead to breakthroughs in bioelectronic medicine, like restoring sight to blind people or movement to paralyzed limbs.

“Charlie spent his whole career trying to help the world, and a handful of individuals who don’t even understand how science works tore the whole thing down,” he said. “And that is just not fair.”

Witnesses over the last week painted Dr. Lieber as a demanding, sometimes impatient academic star, who struggled to manage his relationship with his partners in Wuhan, and complained that Harvard was not acting vigorously to defend him.

“I definitely do not have a good taste” about “many ‘friends’ in China,” Dr. Lieber wrote in an email to a Chinese colleague at another institution. “These people want to use me, so we will not let that happen, versus me using them. But we’ll be ever so polite in the meantime.”

He expressed alarm, in 2018, when investigators Department of Defense and the National Institutes of Health began asking about his participation in the Thousand Talents plan.

“They are threatening not only to end my funding (which supports much of my research) but also force me to pay back the last three plus years they supported much of my work,” he wrote to a Chinese colleague, adding, “perhaps someone (Chinese) who does not like me brought this to attention of N.I.H.?”

In his conversation with the F.B.I. agents on the day of his arrest, Dr. Lieber was reflective about the role of international funding in the lives of researchers, saying that relationships with foreign partners were never as straightforward as they seemed at first.

“Early on, if someone said, ‘We’ll give you this title and we’ll pay your travel to and from,’ you don’t think anything about it,” he explained, “but partners “always want something from you.”

“A lot of countries, money is what they have in excess,” he said. He added, “that’s one of the things China uses to seduce people.”

He tried to impress on the two special agents that a different motive, the desire for acclaim, had brought him to partner with Wuhan and train scientists there.

"I was younger and stupid," he said. "I want to be recognized for what I've done. Everyone wants to be recognized." He offered a comparison he had given his son, a high school wrestler. The Nobel Prize is "kind of like an Olympic gold medal — it's very, very rare," he said.

A prize he had won recently was more like a bronze medal, he said with a self-deprecating laugh. "That probably is the underlying reason I did this," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/21 Millions protest 110yr sentence: too harsh
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/colorado-truck-drivers-110-sentence-crash
GIST	<p>A Colorado prosecutor is asking a court to reconsider the 110-year sentence recently imposed on a truck driver who killed four people and injured many others in a deadly pileup that has prompted outcry from the trucking community and a petition signed by at least four million people.</p> <p>First Judicial District Attorney Alexis King filed a motion Tuesday for a court to set a hearing to review the sentence of Rogel Lazaro Aguilera-Mederos.</p> <p>"As Colorado law required the imposition of the sentence in this case, the law also permits the Court to reconsider its sentence in an exceptional case involving unusual and extenuating circumstances," the motion states. "This would allow for the conditions to be met for a modification of the defendant's sentence as was discussed by the People in the initial sentencing hearing."</p> <p>"The purpose for the People's expedited request is so that the named victims in the case, as well as their families, have an opportunity to be heard by the trial court who is fully aware of the facts of the case," the motion continues. "We have spoken to the living victims and the families of the deceased victims, and it is their specific desire to be heard on this modification, in this forum, as quickly as possible."</p> <p>Fox News has reached out to the attorney for Aguilera-Mederos.</p> <p>King's move came days after Aguilera-Mederos, 26, a Cuban immigrant, was handed down the lengthy prison sentence for the April 2019 fiery crash on Interstate 70 near Denver. Investigators said he lost control of the semi-truck after its brakes failed.</p> <p>He was traveling at about 85 mph before crashing into dozens of stopped cars, causing an explosion. Prosecutors argued that he could have used several ramps to stop. An arrest affidavit said that Aguilera-Mederos tried pulling over to the shoulder off the road, but another semi was already stopped there.</p> <p>Four people were killed: Doyle Harrison, 61, of Hudson; William Bailey, 67, and Stan Politano, 69, both of Arvada; and 24-year-old Denver resident Miguel Angel Lamas Arrellano.</p> <p>The crash damaged or destroyed 28 other vehicles and Aguilera-Mederos was convicted of vehicular homicide and 23 other charges.</p> <p>"I am not a criminal," he tearfully said in court. "I am not a murderer. I am not a killer. When I look at my charges, we are talking about a murderer, which is not me. I have never thought about hurting anybody in my entire life."</p> <p>Many have criticized the sentence as too harsh. Even Colorado District Court Judge A. Bruce Jones seemed not to agree with it but said he was bound by state laws on mandatory-minimum sentencing that required him to impose the punishment to run consecutively as opposed to concurrently.</p> <p>The sentence has since set off a torrent of criticism of prosecutors and Colorado's sentencing guidelines. A petition posted to Change.org requesting commutation has garnered more than 4.5 million signatures.</p>

Return to Top	<p>Kayla Wildeman, the prosecutor in the case, has come under fire after a now-deleted Facebook post on her personal page showed an image of a trophy made from a brake shoe to celebrate the conviction.</p> <p>"Get yourself a trial partner as great as Trevor Moritzky," the post reads. "He turned a brake shoe from a semi truck into a memento. What a special gift from a truly special person. I never asked for a new bff at work, let alone one that is old enough to be my father (no offense) but I sure am grateful this trial brought you into my career as both a colleague and a friend! Words will never convey how lucky I am to have gotten the opportunity to learn from you!"</p> <p>Mortizky is a senior district attorney who worked with Wildeman on the case, according to local reports. In a statement to Fox News, King said the piece was not evidence from the case.</p> <p>"The post was in very poor taste and does not reflect the values of my administration," she said. We have addressed it internally."</p> <p>Some celebrities have called for action in Aguilera-Mederos' favor. Kim Kardashian West on Tuesday tweeted for Democratic Gov. Jared Polis to commute the sentence. The legal team for Aguilera-Mederos has also submitted a clemency application to the governor's office.</p> <p>"We just received Rogel Aguilera-Mederos' application and our legal team is currently reviewing it," Conor Cahill, a spokesperson for Polis, told Fox News in a statement. "Once we reach a decision, we will make an announcement."</p>
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